

ASHLEY CARTER

Violent passion and stormy rivalry
threaten to destroy the South's
most notorious slave-breeding farm...

MIZ LUCRETIA *of* FALCONHURST

FAWCETT
JANUARY

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Old Master Warren lies in bed a-grievin' for his son, Ham, who fled Falconhurst after a black baby dropped from the womb of his lily-white wife. Now the South's greatest stud farm is run singlehandedly by the splendid, raging amazon of a woman who is a slave in name only...

MIZ LUCRETIA *of* FALCONHURST

But trouble comes strolling down the road in the persons of distant cousins Vesta and Bower Ledbetter. Sweet-talking poor Master Warren into accepting them into the bosom of his once-grand home, that scheming white woman Vesta arouses the darkest suspicions of Miz Lucretia. As if Lucretia doesn't already have her hands full teaching the farm's newest stud, Satyr, the arts of love, now she must stop wicked Vesta from invading and destroying her world.

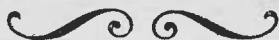
Falconhurst itself—its past glory, its future promise, even its crumbling present—is the prize that locks white woman and black in a fierce battle only one can win.

HERE IS THE MOST SIZZLING CHAPTER YET
IN THE GREAT FALCONHURST SAGA!



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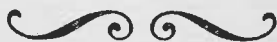
The slave dealer licked at Lucretia's body with his tongue, his lank mustache and sodden whiskers heated.

He had learned in twenty years to stay eternally alert or to suffer. At this moment, he threw all prudence aside, driven by irresistible compulsion.

He had wanted this woman from the first. Her obstinate refusal to submit only intensified his lusts. He would have her. Aye, God, he would. He was white. A white man with a white man's prerogatives.

Lucretia hated him. She hated the sight, the smell, the touch of him. She had to deny in her thoughts what he was doing to her so that she could keep the hatred from glittering like shattering fires in the depths of her black eyes.

She thought about home. About Falconhurst.



**MIZ
LUCRETIA
OF
FALCONHURST**

Ashley Carter

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*Affectionately dedicated to Suzanne and
Donald Cantrell, who love Miz Lucretia
Borgia almost as much as I do*

A faint, disembodied noise, like a whisper in an empty room, disturbed him in his sleep. He came awake abruptly and sat up on his cornshuck mattress, rope supports squealing. Breathing raggedly, he stared about in the vague glow of a night-trimmed wick of his table lamp. Trembling, he called out before he was fully awake, "Ham? That you, son? Ham . . . ?"

Waking fully, he realized that whatever had startled him from sleep—house slave, night-sneaking intruder, unearthly specter, the devil himself, evil wraith, voodoo conjuration, or beatific cherub from that elysian beyond where, eight long years deceased, Miz Sophie awaited him—whatever it was condemned him to more sleepless dark hours of unabated loneliness in this empty night. He scrubbed his arms against the chill of that strange eeriness infesting this house ever since Ham had gone away.

"Hammond," he whispered. "Hammond, my son."

He felt his eyes burn with tears. "Taken me hours to git to sleep. Take hours agin . . . an' I lie here not wantin' to live, not able to die."

Warren Maxwell choked back a sob of self-pity. He had cried himself to sleep every night for these six eternal months since his beloved son had departed for the Texies.

He tried to control the painful sobs that wrenched his whole body, and sometimes he could stifle those awful heartbroken wails, but more often he could not, and he lay sobbing in the darkness, past midnight.

His skin felt too tight for his fingers, and his joints burned. He hefted one hand in the other painfully to relieve the throbbing of the misshapen knuckles, even for a minute. Yet in spite of the pain and agony it would cost him, he could not go on sitting there. That noise troubled him, aroused in him hopes as warm as they were false. He braced himself, swung his legs over the side of the mattress, and staggered to his feet.

He was tall, thin, sag-shouldered and pain-twisted in his nightshirt, the meat seared off his bones by the slow-smoldering fire and burn of relentless pain, that volcano of malaise he carried inside his marrow. Except for the pain, he told himself, his mortal life was over. He seldom bothered to shave anymore; his scabrous red-gray beard was patchy on his sun-seared cheeks. God knew, he was getting old. It was not only a matter of years, though they added up, like stones on his shoulders. Fifty. In a few years he'd be fifty. Fifty lay up ahead of him, and he saw beyond it the grinning mask of death. A man was old when he was fifty, gelded by time, especially when his body was racked with inflictions and pains no human corpus was ever intended by nature to endure and survive. He stood, twisted and gnarled with diseases from which he found no temporary escape and never any brief sanctuary.

He plodded on his bare feet, liver-colored, disfigured by pain, with jagged, malformed toenails. As if crossing beds of red coals, he went to the smeared window.

Warren cupped his hands on both sides of his temples and scanned the yard and the dark lane that led through the tupelos and elms and oaks to the Benson trace. Squinting, he searched hopefully for some sign of Ham's returning home. That was all he waited for, all he lived for. "Oh, Ham," he whispered.

The night and the grounds and the lane were empty,

silent and empty, as they would always be for him until Ham came home again. An early-evening rain had blown across to the southeast, lingering only long enough to wet down everything and leave behind the numbing damp chill that aggravated the pains twisting his joints.

At last, defeated, he straightened and turned, his sun-faded blue eyes blurred by unshed tears. He tottered back to his bed. He'd known Ham was not coming home, but he could not stop hoping, he could not stop looking. He toppled at an angle across his mattress and lay for a long time on top of the high-piled woolen blankets and comforters, which, heavy as they were, hardly afforded any heat or warmth or relief to his aching bones and bloodless legs.

Lying there, he kept warning himself that he'd better crawl back under the stack of blankets or he'd add double pneumonia to the unrelenting fire of rheumatism and arthritis. But he did not move. It did not matter. He was always cold. He felt ill with cold, but it was no longer worth the effort to drag his body under the heavy covers. Without Ham there was no reason to live. It did not matter that he ailed and died; he had been dead since Ham had gone away to the Texies.

If he lived for anything, it was the touch of Ham's lips on his kissing him good night. This was one need he could never fill, one loss he could never recover, or adjust to. He had kissed his son good night every bedtime since Ham had been born, full on the lips, clinging to him, showing the depth of the emotion that swelled in his heart. His son! Aye, God, he needed to kiss Ham good night. This gesture reassured him that there was reason and sanity and goodness in a mindless, uncaring cosmos. And more than that, it was the sign of the shared affection he was desolated without. He was miserable when he did not kiss Ham good night.

He cursed, voice choked, face pressed into the covers. He did not even really deceive himself. He'd known all along that he'd not heard Ham, that it was not Ham's returning that had wakened him, but he could not help

playing that foolish game either. Even when he knew better, he kept listening for Ham's horse's hooves in the yard; he lived only for the moment of Ham's return. God knew, there was nothing else to live for.

He waited for a sign he did not find, a face he did not see, a voice he did not hear. And he worried about Ham. Out in all kinds of inclement weather, no one to massage and care for his game leg, traveling only God knew where. Among strangers. Ham's place was here at Falconhurst. God must have intended it that way. God certainly knew, he had built it all only for Ham. He had months ago given it up to Ham to run, to own, to possess, to build. Ham knew breeding niggers for sale better than any man he'd ever met. He'd wanted Ham to take over running the vast estate and he'd hoped desperately to keep him, to kindle the ambition that would burn out that siren dream of a new life in the Texies.

"Oh, Ham," he whispered. "What's your pa goin' do without'n you?"

He shuddered, hearing his own querulous voice. Talking to himself. His face burned. He felt old, finished. He was losing his grip. God knew, he did talk to Ham, alone, nights up in this room. It seemed as if his son were here, in the darkness, waiting to hear about the day at Falconhurst, the way they'd always talked things over. He could *feel* Ham's presence. And he lay cold and bereft and frightened on those nights when he could not.

Still, he didn't try to deceive himself about this; his mind wasn't that far gone. Talking to a beloved son who was hundreds of miles away might be comforting, but it was not normal behavior. Far from normal. Madhouses were overrun with old people who talked to themselves. But even knowing it was wrong, abnormal, sick-headed, he found his only solace when he conjured up Hammond's dear presence in the chilled and lonely nights. He talked things over with Ham—whether Ham was there or not—because he needed to. He needed Ham with him in his decline.

Yet he admitted Ham had done the only thing he

could have done. Ham had run away from the agony of tragedy no boy should be asked to bear. A black git dropped out of the womb of his white wife. Betrayed by his own woman, whom he'd protected and revered and set on a pedestal as every white man ought to regard a gentle white lady. Poor Ham. He had slaked his lusts on the bedwench Ellen so that the gentle Blanche would be spared the hated fury of a man's carnal passions. He had done all any white gentleman could do to respect and protect his wife and the sanctity of his marriage. When Ham had learned the devastating truth—that Blanche had been raped by the black Mandingo buck Mede, not once but four times at least, and her sending secretly for him to rape her, and right in this house and in Ham's own bed—well, God knew Ham had followed the only course opened to him. He'd secured a powdery poison from the vet and fed it to the faithless Blanche in her hot toddy. He had forced the Mandingo Mede into a vat of boiling water, having to puncture the black giant's belly with his pitchfork tines to prod him into the stew pot. Ham had buried Blanche and her slain black issue together in the white burial ground, but apart from the blameless and respectable members of the Hammond and Maxwell families, with them but not among them.

Ham had done only what he'd had to do. The father regretted losing the beautiful Mandingo stud before he impregnated a dozen or so black dams ahead of his execution, but he had hesitated even to suggest this idea to his son. Ham seethed inside with cold rage, moving in a state of turmoil—as any self-respecting white man would. Ham had coldly and calmly expunged the shame of a white woman raped by a black man in the only way he could. He had killed her and her black lover, for her honor as well as his. But even after this vengeful orgy, Ham had found life here at Falconhurst intolerable.

As long as the agonized boy stayed on at Falconhurst he could not escape the vision and nightmares and shameful memories of his fragile wife clutched in the bestial arms of the Mandingo. Not even swift deadly justice

erased that ugliness and horror from his mind. He had to get away, to flee and outrun the agonies that pursued him. The father could understand and condone all this; he simply could not reconcile himself to the immensity of his own loss. He was overcome with self-pity and fear about his own future.

Warren pressed his gnarled fingers hard against his eyes, trying to shut out the memories, those last days when Ham had opened that box of horrors, by questioning the Negro servants, and learned the truth about the way Blanche had sent secretly every day for the Mandingo and also had pleased the teenage twin sons of Lucretia Borgia, Alph and Omega. It was as if a cesspool had exploded and the corruption would not stop spewing, inundating them in depravity.

Warren had endured this trauma, allayed his anxieties over his son's distress in the only way open to him. He drank more and more toddies until he was sodden with them and tranquilized by them. He drank until he was barely aware of what went on around him, shadowed figures in an insubstantial world. Drink was his armor, his shield, anodyne for the sorrow inflicting his beloved son. The father knew that only time could cure the rage, the injured pride, the sense of betrayal. Thank God, the boy was not plagued by any sense of guilt. He would not have to bear that burden of guilt. Ham had done nothing wrong, not in man's eyes, not in the eyes of God. He had done only what any southern gentleman would have to do. It was the father who swilled down the toddies against the guilt, the sickness, the flaring of rheumatism as it had never attacked him before, the swelling of the joints, the crippling pain. Toddies brought no cure, only a brief surcease from unbearable torment—suffering of the body and mind and heart and soul.

As the days passed heavily one after the other since Ham's departure, Warren was reduced to praying that time would ease his own agony and loss. But God had him now, battered and sore and hanging by the thumbs,

and God just let him swing there, unable to bring Ham back, unable to take up his life without him. . . .

Warren's mind returned, as it did again and again, to the tenth day after Blanche's death and burial. He could still hear Ham's voice clearly inside his own head, with the sick threat of doom in it: "Well, reckon I goin', goin' 'bout tomorrow."

"Goin'? Goin' whure?" The toddies had helped Warren control the terror in his voice, fight back the agony that coursed through him.

"Jest a-goin' . . ."

". . . then you goin' be satisfy, you reckon?"

"I 'on't know." He could hear Ham's voice, clearer than the sounds and night noises around in the huge, sparsely furnished old bedroom. "Mayhap I goin' to saunter on west, mayhap clean to the Texies, fin' some good ground to grow cotton on, whure I kin look a white man in the face without he sayin' to hisself, 'There go Hammond Maxwell, whose white wife pleased with niggers.' "

"Nobody don't know that." Warren fought to keep the pleading from his tone.

"Savin' I know it, an' you know it, an' Redfield knows it, and his widder. An' who knows how many more?"

". . . I cain't hold you from goin'." Maxwell had wanted to clutch his son in his arms physically to restrain him from leaving. But he went on sitting in his big chair, wrapped in blankets, placid-appearing. "Take along the gold, whatever you want of it, an' the niggers, many as you need. . . . Falconhurst is here for you to come back to."

Now, lying across his bed, Warren felt his eyes fill and burn with tears that made him feel as weak as a woman.

Falconhurst is here for you to come back to. . . .

Oh, Hammond. My son. My son Hammond.

Falconhurst is here for you to come back to. . . .

* * *

His teeth chattering, Warren surrendered to the burn and lancing of the cold. He had to get under the covers, whether it was worth it or not. His whole body shook, his arms sprouted goose bumps, and his lower limbs felt numb. He didn't mind dying. God knew, he didn't fear dying. It was living in this agony and this loneliness, with only old age a yawning chasm before him that scared the shit out of him. Still, if he had to live, he could not endure the icy discomfort of the blustering cold.

Hunching up his shoulders, Warren caught the covers and tried to turn them back. He could not do it, because his own weight impeded him. He raged, cursing, reviling his useless hands, the night, and the gods and the covers themselves.

He shivered. He'd have to get off the bed. There was no other way. He rolled across the rumpled dune of wool and slipped his legs over the side of the thick mattress.

His feet touched and then sank slightly into something warm and mealy as a cow patty. He jerked upward, yelling, and someone screamed from the floor beside his bed.

He moved suddenly, as if he were fifteen again and pain-free. He crouched in the middle of his bed, biting back the screams of terror that rose in his throat. He wrapped his arms about his knotted knees and huddled there, trembling.

"Who's that?" he said, panting. "Who there? You answer me—whoever you is."

"It me, Master. Please, Masta, suh, it's me. Myra Belle."

"What the purentee hell you doin' on my floor thataway? You stand up and you talk to me quick, 'fore I cane your ass to bleedin'. Scarin' me to death. Givin' me a heart attack."

Myra Belle got up slowly from the floor beside her master's bed where she'd lain for hours on a quilt. She clutched the coverlet about her shoulders.

Finally able to move, Maxwell crawled over the covers and turned up the wick of his table lamp. "What the hell you doin' heah this time of night, gal?"

For answer, Myra Belle let the quilt fall from her shoulders and stood naked beside the high mattress. The coverlet toppled in a gray pool around her trim ankles. She was about fifteen plantings old. He recalled seeing her around the house, one of the cleaning girls. Lucretia Borgia had brought her in after Ellen-girl came down with the mollygrubs when Master Hammond left the farm. Myra Belle's body gleamed liquidly, a rich bronze, in the yellow lamplight. He recalled a statue he'd seen somewhere once, a shameful nude, but lovely of form, graceful and lithe, with high-standing breasts tipped with small, fresh nipples, flat-planed belly, and the beginnings of pubic hairs. He felt a faint, deep stirring, but it was faint and deep, almost beyond recall. He wished only that Ham could be here to break this one in, to pleasure her and bust her virginity and pleasure himself. The young girl stood, unselfconscious in her nudity, even mildly vain of her loveliness. She gazed at her master with servile affection.

"What you want, gal?" Warren said.

"Me? Why, I wants nothin', Masta."

"Then what the hell you doin' heah?"

"I sent heah, Masta suh. Miz Lucretia Borgia. She send me. She say you need to get warm, and I could lie with you in yo' bed and help you to git heat."

"Then what the hell you doin' on the floor?"

"Miz Lucretia Borgia say. She say I do nothin' less'n Masta say. I waitin' fo' you to say, Masta. You want Myra Belle in yo' bed, Masta suh?"

He shuddered, revulsion washing through him. "I sho' as hell don't. I don't want no bedwench. Don't want *no* black wench. Nevah. Cain't no way abide the stink of nigger musk in my bed."

"I been wash good, Masta," the slave girl protested. "Miz Lucretia Borgia say tell you. Been scrubbed in hot tub, with lye soap an'—man—manganese."

"Don't give a shit. You still smell like a nigger."

"But—I is a nigger, Masta." Myra Belle sniffled. "Your own Myra Belle what wants to do whatever you say—"

"You listen to me, Myra Belle. You wrap yo'self in that quilt. Now. Go on, gal. Do it now. Cover up your nakedness and yo git back to your own bed—"

"Oh, lawd, Masta," the girl wailed. "What I goin' say to Miz Lucretia Borgia?"

"I can tell you one thing you can say to Miz Lucretia Borgia. You say to her if'n she evah do anything like this again, without first tellin' me, I goin' to hang her up and give her thirty strops of the blacksnake. She go'n' bleed good. . . . Now, you tell her that."

"Yes'm." The girl was crying, shivering with fear. It was one thing for the master to tell her what to say to Miz Lucretia Borgia, but it was she who had to face the formidable woman. Her legs felt weak and trembly. "Yes'm, I surely tells her, Masta."

"No. Nevah mind. I tell her. Now. Whilst it still a b'ilin' pizen hot in my brain."

II

There was certainly no reason to doubt that Myra Belle had every right to fear Lucretia Borgia's authority, which had long been firmly established at Falconhurst. She'd even been accorded the title of "Miss" among the slaves, an honor never shown any slave but reserved only for white ladies. To every black on the vast stud farm, from the lowliest child, running bare-assed in the yard, to the most important overseer, she was Miz Lucretia Borgia, a person of dignity and power and influence, and the strength in the back of her hand to fell an ox. The only ones who never called her Miz Lucretia were Master Warren and his son. Myra Belle knew Miz Lucretia Borgia was the most respected, most feared, and most envied person on the estate.

This worthy female of affluence and authority lay wide awake in the darkness, listening to the sounds from her master's bedroom on the floor below hers. She shared this third-floor space with Mem, who snored wanly on his cot pushed as far across the room, under the eaves, as Miz Lucretia had been able to force it. He bumped his head if he sat up suddenly during the night, and the black roofing shakes were only inches above his face, but he was afraid to complain. Miz Lucretia Borgia was looking for one thing, a reason to exile him from this

small room altogether. This was the last thing on this earth that Mem wanted.

Miz Lucretia sighed heavily in the darkness. She was deeply concerned about the health of her master. He had been failing steadily since his beloved son had skylarked off to the Texies, leaving the running of a vast farm to his father and to a slave woman who through sheer will and inner strength had made herself as nearly their equal as any human being could be, and far more than any black could have aspired, more even than the Falconhurst owners suspected, or would ever admit. They were potentates, with power of life and death over the hundreds of blacks on the farm, and she was their vizier, their surrogate in managements of the other slaves. She'd already attained to far higher status than she'd any reason to aspire, and yet she was not satisfied. She wanted more. Miz Lucretia Borgia had been born wanting more.

She held her breath, listening in the darkness, hoping for the faint delighted squeals or peals of laughter from Myra Belle that would reassure her that her latest prescription for Master Warren's depression was effective. She heard nothing except prowling. It was as if she could sense the crackling of tensions as the sleepless man suffered through another restless night.

It was true. Whatever power and authority and advantage she held on this farm, she wanted more. She knew how things ought to be run, more profitably, more successfully. But it was not for herself she wanted it. If she had, she could have dug up four or five of those potbelly cast-iron pots in which the Maxwells buried their gold eagles, and which she always helped them bury and recover when their memories failed them. But she didn't want money; she didn't want to run away to the exciting cities of the world. Falconhurst was her life, her whole life. She wanted to stay here and improve and increase and expand it. It didn't take much to excite and rouse and please her, to turn misery to the happiness that was her birthright. Her excellent health, her indomitable vigor,

and a clear sharp mind all combined together to keep her happy and uncomplaining.

She heard something that sounded like dropped boots from below. Instinctively she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the cot, the singing rope supports loud in the attic dark.

Not even the woolen sack gown she wore could fully conceal Miz Lucretia Borgia's girth and elegance of form. She was a colossal female, but she was perfectly proportioned. Her remarkable stateliness had little to do with corpulence; she was majestic, statuesque, and splendid. Her color was that warm tobacco brown, suggesting she was from one of the noble North African tribes, the conquerors who had established kingdoms while the Celts lived in caves and wrapped themselves in animal hides. Possibly she was Jaloff or Sudanese, with a trace of Mandingo or Hausa. The rough, loose-fitting gown only accentuated her beauty, straining across her proud breasts, nuggetlike nipples swollen against the fabric. She was inordinately vain of her narrow waist, broad but shapely hips, and stalwart thighs to well-formed symmetrical legs and slender ankles—an amazon of a woman and yet strikingly attractive.

The noise of her movement awakened Agamemnon, and he sat up on his cot, bumping his head on the slanted rafter. "Wha's mattah, Miz Lucretia? What you want?"

"Not you," she said, her voice clawing at him. Memnon spent his life caught between Lucretia's sarcasm and his old master's ire. Lucretia felt he brought most of his problems down upon himself through his sloth and irresponsibility. God knew, his duties were small enough, and yet unless they tongue-lashed him, he neglected even those—mixing toddies for Master Warren, replenishing his fires in the parlor, dining room, and bedroom, removing his master's clothes at night and helping him into them in the morning.

She shook her head, staring at him in the darkness. Mem was indulged, fed white-man's viands, kept in clean,

whole clothes, given his choice of black women to pester, because Master Warren was convinced Mem came from some noble African ancestry. He looked valuable enough, strong-thewed, broad-shouldered, yellow of skin, and free from scars. And though she knew him to be worthless, in bed and out of it, and though he was past thirty and would bring a higher price now than later, he was not for sale. He was almost totally unproductive, and yet the white men anticipated wonders from his puny loins. She sighed and shook her head.

She felt Mem's eyes fixed on her breasts pulsing beneath her gown. His lust was like something palpable in the silent darkness, but she was unmoved. She was not even flattered by his attentions. She had long ago learned that Mem wanted much but could take little. She looked on him and all his imagined desires with contempt.

"Where-at you goin' this hour of the night?"

Lucretia Borgia laughed at him. "Who say I goin' anywhere, nigger? Maybe I was comin' over to jump you."

"Yeah . . . and maybe you was sneakin' out to mount with Big Jem. . . . Is that where you was goin'?"

"If'n I was goin', I wouldn't sneak out. You'd be the first to know."

His voice sounded choked. "Oh, I know all right. I know all about you. Bet you was supposed to be meetin' Big Jem somewhere. . . . Yo better be careful. He a randy nigger, and he goin' git you knocked up."

She shrugged. "Tha's a whole lot more than we can ever say about you, ain't it, and you right in the same cage with me."

His voice broke. "You know what's matter with me—"

"Sho' I do. You gives nothin' but puny whey."

"You know what I mean, woman. I ain't nevah been the same since I found out that even when Masta Ham and Masta Warren give you to me to be my woman, you was sneakin' out to lay with that no-good Napoleon."

She laughed. "I needed to be with a real man after I laid awhile with you. . . . One thing 'bout Pole. He was

a real man. He knock me up, first crack out'n the box, with twins . . . and I been months with you and got nothin' but sick to my stomach."

"You got no right to talk to me like that."

"You right. I don't have to talk to you at all. And you stop tryin' to say what I can do and where I can go, and I don't even speak to you at all—'bout nothin'."

"You my woman," he persisted, almost whining.

"Who say?"

"Masta say. Masta Warren say. Masta Ham say 'fore he go away."

"Well, I can tell you. I ain't yo' woman. I ain't no man's woman less'n I wants to be. Less'n I gots the hots to belong to some man, he better not make no move to touch me." She held up her hand, warning him to silence. "Anyhow, ain't you or Pole or Big Jem I studyin' on right now. . . . Ain't no man I frettin' 'bout—it my sweet Masta Warren what got me upset and can't sleep."

Now his voice raked her with sarcasm learned from her. "Yo' *sweet* Masta Warren. . . . Why you care what happen to that scrawny ole white man?"

"I care. Masta Warren and Masta Ham. They like my family. They the only family I got."

"Then you the biggest fool in Alabama, woman. You think that ole white man care a damn about you?"

"In his way he do," she said. "In his way I know he do."

"In his way." His savage laugh clawed at her in the darkness. "You jes' think he care 'bout you, fool."

"I know he care. I lot smarter than yo, Mem. . . . Thank God. . . . An' I know Masta Warren. . . . I know he jes' what he borned and raised to be. . . . Jes' like you is—unfortunately. He cain't help what he been trained to believe. . . . Take a long time to change in a man what he started learnin' to be along with his mammy's milk."

"You had good sense, you'd hate him. These heah almighty, all-powerful white-skinned men."

She winced, knowing that in his own way, Agamemnon was right. These white men. Ugly, narrow-shouldered, big-bellied, their scrawny legs matted with black hairs and their stomachs bulging like a swollen bullfrog—and puniest of all in their manhood, for all their strutting and preening and boasting. Maybe they were even more jealous than afraid of the strong, clean limbs, the liquid-smooth skins, the deep-tendoned chests, and the stud-heavy virility of the black men. Maybe that was why they treated black men like animals, because they feared them, because only by dominating them could they feel superior. Like the heartsick Memnon, she was aware of what white men were and of how little they could be trusted. And yet it seemed to her that the Maxwell men were different, even though they didn't know they were, and didn't even want to be. Anyhow, they had given her a home, and though she had known their cruelty, she had seen flashes of their devotion, reluctant, abashed, backhanded—but real. She was loyal; they owned her loyalty as well as her body. This was what she was, and she could not help what they were; she could only try to change them little by little, as she could.

"I different from you, Memnon," she said in her best scathing tone. "I got sense enough to try to git along."

"You try to git along. With that old bastid down there? An' what he care 'bout you? Them twins you so doted on. He sold them, didn't he? An' you think you run this heah farm—an' they sold you too. They sold you off—ain't been a year ago—and you back, talkin' 'bout yo' *sweet* Masta Warren."

"I back home," she said in a hollow voice. And yet that damned stupid Memnon. He had opened a box of evil she could not ignore. He forced her to see a face she dreaded and feared and still met in nightmares. Jules Adrian Marie Roche. She bit back the sickness that gorged up in her throat. It was still hard for her to believe so much evil and corruption could be encased in such a small body. Roche was a little man, daintily made, with a humped back. His hunchback pulled him

out of kilter, so he sidled, crablike, in a rapid, mincing way. One thought of a bird trying to fly with one wing broken. His scraggly long hair—what was left of it, for he was scabrously balding—long, straight about his ears and over the collar of his expensive silk shirts. Tiny, piercing black eyes glittered in his swarthy, hawk-nosed face, with mascaraed lips and carmine spots painted on his cheekbones.

“Yes. They sold me. But they could not of knowed what sinfulness they sold me and my twin boys into—”

“They didn’t give a shit. Not long as that Roche paid them gold eagles. He paid. Didn’t even haggle over the price. An’ they let you go with him.”

“I came back,” she whispered, caught now in the horror of the memory. “I couldn’t stand it down there in New Orleans in that dwarf’s sweet-stinkin’ mansion. It like some lovely place turned nasty with vile.”

“It jes’ a *white* man’s house,” Mem surmised in a savagely mild tone.

“What you know? Ain’t no self-respectin’ white person live like that man lived, with a harem of naked black boys, doin’ things too sick to say.”

“How many white folks you know? Maybe they all live like that—in they own houses. You know how they lie and strut and hypocrite ’round.”

“I know that was a den of evil. My own twin boys he made into simperin’ little imps. He let ’em hit me and pinch me and suck my titties in front of him and his fine white friends. Lettin’ ’em milk me like I was a fat cow, for the laughin’ of his frien’s. . . . They carries on . . . drunk, runnin’ ’round nekked, without’n a stitch on them, savin’ diamond earbobs what he gives ’em to wear. Revilin’ an’ cussin’ me—they own momma—what they come to mock and disown and beat on. . . . In jes’ a little while, my twins as evil as that Roche hisself. . . . They become devils. They lots o’ pesterin’ goin’ on, but it between boys and men and boys and boys and men and men . . . ain’t nothin’ ever natural . . . ’cause that’s all they don’t want to see down there. They laugh and

scorn me, 'cause I's a woman . . . an' a woman purentee got no place in a house like that."

She could speak all of these things aloud, and yet the deepest hurt she could not put in words. She could not express, and Memnon would never have understood, the final reason why she ran away from Roche's Charles Avenue mansion in New Orleans and made her way on a mule to Falconhurst. They tried to reduce her to animality; they stripped her of her pride and dignity and her innate nobility. She lost her twins and she endured that. They took away her status and this agonized her. They abused her and ridiculed and reviled her and she lived through it. But when they robbed her of her pride and self-respect, she rebelled and escaped.

"I run away," she said in a whisper, speaking half to herself, trying to purge herself of the hated memory. "I walked out of that house and I know I die, but I ain't nevah goin' back to that sick sour-sweet place. . . . Even when I gits back to Falconhurst and Masta Ham and Masta Warren say I bought and paid for and sold, I knowed I wasn't going back. I tole my mastas. They could turn me out and drive me off—I turn my mule and go the other way."

She remembered how she had taken some of the gold coins from her twins, money paid to them for the acts of sodomy endured of white men. She found a high-yellow boy who could write to make out a pass for the slave patrolers, with Roche's signature forged to it. . . . "No matter. I back home now from that New Orleans. Back home to stay."

He laughed. "That Roche come for you, Masta make you go with him. Don't you think he won't."

"No." She shook her head stubbornly. "I back home to stay."

"You a fool to come back heah."

"I always come back home."

"Home! You fat ole fool. This ain't yo' home. You a slave heah—you nothin' but a slave."

She shuddered visibly, crossing her arms over her

beautiful breasts. "All I know is I belong. Here. At Falconhurst. All I know is without'n me, they ain't no Falconhurst. . . . An' that's all I needs to know."

She heard a door slam on the second floor of the old house, heard it jerked open and slammed against a wall. In her mind she could see Myra Belle running from her master's bedroom, and the aging violent man hurling the door closed after her. His reopening it boded evil for her.

In her vivid imagining Lucretia Borgia saw Master Warren stride out into the night-shadowed corridor in his calf-length woolen gown, his pain-warped feet bare, growing tender with cold. He put his head back and bawled at the top of his voice, rattling plates and disturbing the entire household.

"Lucretia Borgia! You black nigger wench. Where are you, Lucretia Borgia? You git your ass down heah to me. And you git it down heah now."

Automatically responding, Miz Lucretia Borgia reached out for the bright red turban that she wore wrapped around her head, without which no one ever saw her, because she hated the frizz and kinkiness of her short, wiry black hair.

She heard Memnon snicker from his cot across the small room.

"What yo' laughin' at, nigger?"

"You. . . . There yo' *sweet* Masta Warren. . . . He a-callin' you. . . . An' you better go running. You don't want to be sold down the river, first coffle pass this way."

Miz Lucretia Borgia drew a deep breath. Her fist tightened on the fabric of her turban. She sat there gripping it. At last she dropped the bright cloth back on the cane-bottomed chair beside her cot. She lay down on the mattress, exhaling heavily. "Don't reckon I go," she said. "Masta, he'll feel more tol'able 'bout all this in the mawnin' . . ."

III

Miz Lucretia Borgia was out of her cot and dressed before dawn that morning. Pulling her sack dress down over her magnificent body and wrapping her hair in her red turban, she glanced in chilled contempt at Agamemnon snoring, sawing logs good, on his cot under the eaves. Though Mem should have the hearth fires and the wood-burning kitchen stove fired up by now, and would be reviled because he did not, she let him sleep. She hated him this morning, and she didn't care what happened to him. He had struck her where she was most vulnerable, and she didn't find it easy to forgive—he had hit her in her pride. "I a pridey woman," Miz Lucretia Borgia said to herself. "An' cain't help that. Born that way, I was."

She padded down the rear stairwell to the kitchen, where she made a stove fire and set coffee water on to boil. She walked out to the rear stoop and gazed across the vast acreage of the stud farm, the snake fences, the barns, the meeting house remodeled into a dormitory for the young boys, the huts of the slave quarters, the corrals and pens and stables and smithy, all silent and still. It was the hour she loved best: a clear, clean smell in the unspoiled air, a quiet. The rain had subsided to a drizzle and passed over during the night, leaving faint

starlit puddles freckled across the yard. Droplets formed and trickled from leaves of the trees—maples, tupelos, oaks, chestnuts, hickories, and elms. She stood for a long time, breathing deeply, surveying the beautiful land, feeling good and somehow excited inside at what she saw and felt.

By six A.M. Miz Lucretia had two riders setting off in the pink dawn for Benson for supplies. Before Master Ham left, the riders had gone into town only once a week. Now Miz Lucretia dispatched them daily. There was always a chance there might be a letter or some word from Master Ham. So far there never had been, but each day the old master asked, and they both prayed.

She returned to the kitchen, where her helpers had started to prepare the ordinary breakfast of the house—scrambled eggs, ham slices, grits, red-eye gravy, thick-slab day-old bread toasted, and coffee. She poured herself a mug of coffee and sipped it, walking around overseeing the morning activity.

She went through the breakfast room, where young black girls busily set the table, though Master Warren would undoubtedly eat alone. The place was prepared for a large family or unexpected company. Few visitors came to Falconhurst, but one could not be sure. The huge room was warm and comfortable. A log fire crackled in the brick fireplace, and an iron teakettle sang and steamed on the hob. The long maplewood table was covered with a red-and-white-checked cloth, set with the best bone china dishes and silverware that had been in the family for a couple of generations.

Miz Lucretia passed unspeaking through the busy lamplit room. She went along the corridor and into the living room to be certain everything was in readiness for Master Warren when he tottered down the wide stairway from his bedroom. No lamp was lit in the old parlor, but to her astonishment a fire burned on the hearth, sending a cerise glow across heavy furnishings and aged framed paintings on the musty walls.

She frowned. She had not seen Mem downstairs, and

yet the fires burned, the chores were accomplished. Praise God, there might even be a hot toddy awaiting Master Warren this morning.

For a long beat in the shadowed room, Miz Lucretia Borgia did not see the aging master of Falconhurst crouched in a blanket-covered old rocking chair facing the fireplace. He hunkered there, his arms pressed across his face. He looked as if he were being beaten about the head and shoulders and could not endure the torment nor escape it. Muffled sobs racked his body. She had seen her master in violent temper, in the uncontrolled fury of a god who cannot be crossed or even advised, the rage of an insane man, but crying like this, he seemed to be a child, a forlorn, heartbroken child. He sagged in upon himself, his wide, bony shoulders shaken with his crying.

He twisted his head and stared up at her. Tears streaked his face, but his voice lashed at her. "Where-at's that goddamn Mem? An' my toddy?"

"Didn't Mem build your fire, Masta?"

"You know goddamn well he didn't. I been down heah most of the night. I built this fire myself. But I ain't warm. Ain't no way I can git warm."

Before she replied, Miz Lucretia went to the wood box and selected the fattest oak log and placed it on the andirons. "I see I can find Mem, Masta," she said. "I have you a hot toddy in the switch of a lamb's tail."

"Nevah mind Mem. Nevah mind my toddy. Lived this long without'n it, can git by few more minutes. Hit you I want to talk to, Miss Uppity."

"What I done, Masta honey?" Miz Lucretia came close and laid her hand on his shoulder, caressing him lightly.

"Lucretia Borgia, yo' a fo'teen-caliber bitch, ain't you?"

"Why you say that, Masta?"

"Whyn't you come when you heared me a-callin' an' a-yellin' for you in the night?"

She gasped, shocked. "Oh, Masta honey. Did you call me las' night?"

He gazed at her, his pale eyes unblinking. "You know goddamn good an' well I called you till I was hoarse-throated. I roused the house, goddamn it."

"Do tell. I sleeps light. Listenin' for my deah masta."

Maxwell jerked his head, staring past her as Mem crept into the room. "Mem!"

"Suh?"

"You heah me yellin' for Lucretia Borgia las' night?"

Mem trembled visibly, ready to cry. He glanced toward Miz Lucretia Borgia and decided where lay his greatest peril. He managed to roll his eyes and shake his head. "If'n Miz Lucretia Borgia didn' heah you, Masta, me, I didn' hea nothin' neither."

"You son of a bitch." Maxwell stared at the house slave. "You more scairt of her than you is of me. Well, maybe you won't be when I has Pole cut you with a whip a few times."

"Maybe the storm was so loud," Miz Lucretia Borgia suggested.

He jerked his gaze back to her smiling face. "You lyin' black wench. That storm stopped 'fore midnight."

Miz Lucretia gasped. "Lawdy, how I musta slept las' night. Musta jest slept plum through that rain comin' an' goin'."

He shook his head, frustrated, face flushed with rage. The fire crackled behind him, sending sparks spinning out upon the hearth and almost to the throw rugs at his feet. He cursed her vilely back at least two generations. "You ain't gettin' out of this all that easy, Miss Uppity. You a-sendin' a slave girl up to my bed last night."

Mem said sotto voce, "See how sweet Masta love you for what you done?"

"Don't no way loves her for it. Don't no way appreciates it. Hates her for it. You know I don't want no black bedwench. You know I hates and despises nigger musk in my bed." He burst suddenly into tears. "Oh, where-at is my boy Ham? Things jest gone to hell without'n him. Don't see how I can git along."

"I takes care of you, Masta," Lucretia whispered. "Don't you fret. I takes care of you."

He shook his head. "Cain't nobody help me. Seems like Falconhurst done sinking in a sinkhole of evil. . . . Like God Hissself done turn against His lovin' servant. Like God done visited a plague on the land. Thought my heart break and my mind burn inside my skull when dear Miz Blanche give birth to a black git. . . . But the evil not over. Hit barely begun. . . . Ham a-slaying Mede, b'iling the very flesh off he bones, and pourin' that soup ovah Miz Blanche's grave to let it seep down on her and her poor misbegotten black chile. . . . I think then God struck me with more than any mortal can endure . . . but it's an evil god that takes my only begotten son from me. My son I loves more than life. . . ."

He went on talking, rambling, cursing against his fate and the evil that had befallen him, and him blameless before God. From the corner of her eye Lucretia saw Myra Belle motioning to her from the foyer doorway. Quietly, the big woman tiptoed across the room and stepped out into the corridor. "Hit Mista Napoleon. He in the kitchen. He say he got to see you. Right now. Hit most urgent."

Miz Lucretia nodded, sending the girl back to the kitchen ahead of her. She returned to the rocking chair where Master Warren hunkered, weeping in his heart-break.

She soothed down Maxwell's scraggly red-gray hair on his scalp, her palm gentle. "Don't you fret. They's good days a-comin'. Mem goin' right now to fix yo' mornin' toddy." She heeled around. "An' you, Mem. You fix it strong. And hot. Mighty hot, you heah me?"

Big Napoleon, his shoulders massive and muscular, stood just inside the kitchen door in denim shirt, osnaburg britches, and bare feet. He was gulping down hot black coffee from a mug. He finished off the drink as Miz Lucretia entered the room. He looked troubled, but he began to smile admiringly at his first glimpse of Miz

Lucretia. "My, you do look handsome this mornin'," Napoleon said. "My. My. My."

Miz Lucretia was pleased. She felt the liquid warmth flow downward in her, the way it did when she saw Pole or remembered the way he covered a lady; Pole left his women desiring nothing. But she spoke sharply. "If'n you come up here to say that, you can git on your way, niggah. I too busy fo' yo' foolishness this mawnin'."

She was aware that Mem had paused, pouring whiskey into a tall toddy glass, watching them, his yellow face bleak, his eyes dead. The chore girls giggled, exchanging gances, too, but Miz Lucretia ignored them all.

"Cain't help that I admires you, Miz Lucretia," Pole said. "Even if'n I know slaves is forbidden 'round the big house, still sometimes I got to come just to freshen up my eyes on you."

"You tell me why you come," she said. "An' you git back to the barn." But her eyes did not reprove him and he saw it, breathing in a way that expanded his vast and muscular chest.

Pole nodded, shifting his weight from one huge foot to the other, a gentle giant. "Hit that well out back of the kitchen, Miz Lucretia. One that we uses at the barn, and some of yo' kitchen water comes from it too. Hit come up dry. Dry as a chip. Ain't no way to git even a bucket o' wet mud up from it, even in this rainy season. Don't know what is wrong, Miz Lucretia, but that well done gone dead and dry."

"I'll talk to Masta Warren," Miz Lucretia said. "Maybe he'll want you to get a crew to dig another one."

"Diggin' won't be too bad," Napoleon said. "But we need a divinin'. That a dry well. Hit also eighty feet—maybe ninety feet—deep. We dig that deep, need divinin', so's we know we find good supplies of fresh water."

"I tells the masta," she said. "You wait here."

She followed Mem from the kitchen, across the dining room, and along the corridor to the parlor, where Maxwell sprawled with his feet extended to the hearth and the roaring fire, the blanket snug about his shoulders.

Mem tried to talk to her. Miz Lucretia gestured sharply downward with her hand, her mouth twisting. "I got no time to talk to you, niggah."

She waited until Mem delivered the hot toddy and Maxwell sipped it. The master tasted the concoction, smacked his lips, and ran his tongue around them. He nodded. "It's all right this mawnin'."

Mem did not admit that he had tripled the usual amount of whiskey, fascinated by the smiling, secret glances exchanged between Lucretia Borgia and big Pole across the room.

Miz Lucretia shoved Mem aside. She told Maxwell what Nap had reported to her. "Hit desperate losin' a big well like that," she said. "You wants to talk to Pole?"

Master Warren seemed not to have heard her at all. When she asked again if he wanted to see Nap, he shook his head. "What I want to talk to that nigger for?"

"Nap say you goin' need divin' to find water."

The aging man waved his knotted hand. "No. No. I can't talk to him now. Send him away."

"We lose a whole entire eighty-foot well, Masta—"

"Goddamn you, Lucretia Borgia. I don't give a damn. Send him away. I can't think 'bout that now."

Miz Lucretia Borgia worried about the dry well, which was vital to the life of the estate, but she did not mention it to Master Warren again. It wasn't that she feared nagging him; she didn't fear the devil himself. It was just that she didn't want to waste her breath; there was no way to make Maxwell listen, or care. His mind was turned inward.

She went about her chores. Running the old farm kept her busy sixteen hours a day. She tried to keep the place operating as smoothly as Master Ham had done when he was at home. When Master Ham returned, she meant for him to find Falconhurst as successful as when he'd left, maybe even some improved.

She ordered the Negro field hands out to chop cotton

and weed the gardens that fed manor house and slaves. No one had to tell her that Falconhurst was no cotton-growing farm anymore. There was only one money crop this estate grew and offered for sale, black slaves. Since England had interdicted slave trade on the high seas and Thomas Jefferson had outlawed importing slaves, the Negro workers had to come from somewhere. The entire southern economy was based upon a continuing supply of black slaves to work for food and keep. Falconhurst supplied slaves—quality men and women, fancy grades who brought the highest prices of all on every auction vendue dais. Still, chopping cotton was good exercise, nothing more than recreation. Chopping helped firm up handsome bodies and occupy idle minds. Although Falconhurst slaves were too expensive ever to be wasted as common field hands, they had to be prepared for a world beyond its limits, a world of labor, of slavery.

She set crews to clear new lands, split rails to fence it, chop logs and kindling for house fires, but most of all to keep the blacks exercised and busy.

As she worked she studied over ways to replace the vital well that had gone dry, but without a conjurer, a water diviner, she was unsure how to start.

She was busy when she heard screaming in the yard. The little black lookouts, clad in pressed linens and osnaburg and posted at the gate overlooking the trace, came shouting like magpies. "Company, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am. Company . . . comes a trader wif nigger slaves to sell."

Miz Lucretia Borgia went into the parlor, where Maxwell was sprawled, head twisted, napping before the fire. He started, sitting up when she came near. "What you want?"

"Company. Slave trader with blacks to sell, chillun say."

"We overrun with blacks. They sure hit a trader?" The man got up and trudged painfully to the cloudy window, on which he wiped a space through which he

gazed intently. He spoke over his shoulder. "Mayhap it be Masta Ham, come back home."

She shrugged and said nothing until he returned to his chair. He peered up at her. "Them boys come back from Benson with the supplies yet?"

She nodded. He smiled, leaning forward in his chair. "Was they any mail, airy letter from Masta Ham?"

"Wasn't nothin'," she said.

"Well, why in hell didn't you tell me? Damn you. Lettin' me sit here an' hope long past time when hope was gone. Don't you think I want to know what goes on 'round here?"

She could hear the caravan coming up the lane. Her curiosity consumed her. She was eager to get out there. Slave traders were the scum of the earth, and usually they brought nothing but some new communicable disease to spread among the Falconhurst stock. She never let the visitors within an acre of her blacks. The peril of epizootic was too fearful. Get some disease among the slaves and the entire herd could be wiped out overnight.

"I best git out there," she said. "Got to warn that slaver not to let his infested blacks no nearer than the head of the lane."

"Send him away. We ain't buyin' nothin'. . . . We got nothin' to sell." He hesitated and then said, "That high-yellow tad—name of Tige, I think?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia smiled, recalling the boy. "Yes, sir, he the son of our own Masta Ham, out'n that pretty Ophelia gal."

"That Tige jest a black git, even he does have some human blood."

"He look more and more like Masta Ham, ever' blessed day."

"That the whole damn trouble. That Tige. Lookin' like my own Masta Ham. Recallin' my own son to me when he was a tyke . . . I won't have it. You sell that Tige off. Today. To this man. I don't care what he like, or whure he goin', you jus' sells off that black Tige, you understand?" He painfully pulled himself to his

feet. "Mayhap I jest go out and set on the veranda an' make sure you do as I say."

He allowed Miz Lucretia Borgia to support him. They made their way slowly across the parlor and the foyer. She pushed opened the screen door and they went out on the veranda. Maxwell, holding the blanket about his shoulders, sank into a rocking chair.

Every coffle was sorry-looking, a ragged gathering of the dregs of slavery, the sick, the halt, blind, maimed, or insane. These coffles gathered up what they could, where they could. Many of the greatest plantations would not deal with them or permit them within their gates unless the planters had some intractable black who had reverted to the bush and was wild and unmanageable. The profession of dealing in Negroes was despised, no matter how necessary. Dealers did save planters from the necessity of trips to slave markets with one or two aging slaves they wanted to sell off or trade for younger laborers; they were good for riddance of blacks who had gone bad, and they paid cash for those they bought. They were evil; a necessary evil.

Maxwell watched the trader come along the lane under the tupelos, the crosshatching of sunlight scarring the heads and shoulders of his black animals. When they reached the edge of the front yard, Miz Lucretia sent Pole running to halt them and to permit the white trader to dismount and cross the sunlit, bare yard to the veranda.

IV

"Name of Shoat, suh . . . Putney Shoat." The slave trader strode across the sun-braised yard to the foot of the wide plank steps. He was a swarthy, squat man, with powerful shoulders and keg chest encased in greasy shirt, shabby vest, and wear-spotted broadcloth jacket. His short, massive legs strained against the fabric of his smeared pearl-gray trousers. Even his boots were run over, mud-caked, and sole-eroded. Miz Lucretia Borgia felt for Shoat that instinctive contempt only a black can feel for a "trashy" white.

Shoat hesitated at the foot of the steps in the hazy sunlight. Behind him his coffle sank to the ground, sitting in the mud, squatting, or kneeling, shackled. The Falconhurst blacks, excited by the arrival of outsiders and curious, ringed the yard, silent and watchful.

Maxwell permitted a quick nod of his head, acknowledging Shoat's introduction. He did not invite the slave trader up on the porch. "I am Mr. Warren Maxwell," he said in a flat tone. "Owner of this heah estate."

"I know you well, Mr. Maxwell," Shoat said with a fawning smile. "Leastways, know you by reputation, I do. Know you raise and sell only the finest-grade niggers."

"Eh? What you doin' out this way? You ain't 'round tryin' to steal yo'self a few niggers, mayhap?"

Shoat straightened, swelling slightly at this gratuitous insult. His leathered face reddened beneath the floppy brim of his bonnet. He managed to keep his voice calm, though obviously he seethed inside. "No call to be insultin', sir. I ain't done nothin' to earn yo' disrespect. I am a respectable businessman. Same as you, suh. In fact, I am in the same industry—the buyin' an' sellin' o' nigger flesh. Agree, I ain't so fortunate or so fancy as you." Shoat swung his arm, indicating the vast cleared acres and buildings and chattel of Falconhurst. Compared with many plantations he visited, Falconhurst, despite the exotic elegance of its name, was unimpressive, an ugly old and unpainted farmhouse. No long avenue of manicured hedges or trees led to it from the trace; only a rutted lane wormed between aged trees. Perhaps once the place had had a coat of paint, but only traces of such care remained. The manor house was medium large, of weather-beaten clapboards, two stories capped with a high-slanting roof of cedar shakes, blackened by time. Two dormer windows marked the attic. The roof swept out to cover the gallery, which extended across the front and was supported by plain round posts with no pretensions to elegance. Two doors opened off this wide porch, which boasted a few splint-bottomed chairs. Rain barrels stood on stone supports at every corner of the place. Despite its unimpressive appearance, Shoat could see it was a strongly built home, much added to, large and comfortable enough for a good-sized family. Around the veranda was a carefully tended border of chrysanthemums, carnations, azaleas, asters, verbena, and many perennials, planted by the mistress and maintained in her memory by slaves who never knew her. It was a house with tradition; the roots of its family went deep. Shoat could not deny this. It was evident in everything, even in the pile of fieldstones beyond the house, gathered by slaves and piled roof-high, for some planned new mansion or running fence, the slaver supposed. These people had been at Falconhurst forever, and it

looked as if their plans to stay extended forward into the unforeseeable and eternal future.

Shoat exhaled heavily. "Still, I am an honest merchant, jes' tryin' to make an honest dollar, same as you, suh. I here because I believe I has merchandise of quality and beauty to tickle yo' fancy and whet yo' appetite an' warm yo' heart." Shoat laughed broadly. "As well, I hope, also to open yo' pocketbook."

"Yo' wastin' yo' time."

"Time is all I got, suh. An' I hope to change yo' mind and prove I ain't wastin' yo' time."

"You could hardly have in that miserable herd nothin' to interest me," Maxwell said. The aging man rocked slowly, staring at something across the head of the slaver. He was too poorly and too sad of heart to care about the niceties of southern hospitality, or this white trash's sensitivity. And he knew slaves well enough to know good quality never came from dung heaps. He wanted this man and his sorry rabble off his land. Shoat's flock would end in the delta cane fields, or chopping cotton on some seedy subsistence farm somewhere. Falconhurst slaves were always of the finest quality, never purchased for heavy work in cane or cotton fields. They were prime specimens, and "Falconhurst" for a slave was the same as "sterling" applied to silver. Falconhurst slaves usually led a pampered existence wherever they went; they were shown off and admired, used principally to cover selected wenches in order to extend and improve the breed. Just as a blooded bull or stallion might be purchased for his looks and prestigious background, so was a Falconhurst buck acquired. His progeny were eagerly awaited and shown off as proudly as Thoroughbred colts or registered calves. He felt a faint pity for those miserable culls crouched at the head of his lane like some scabrous eyesore, but he felt contempt, too, contempt for their quality and for the man who peddled them.

"Cost you nothin' jus' to look." Shoat continued to smile. He was long accustomed to being villified, humili-

ated, insulted. He no longer gave a damn, as long as he made a dime. What did he care about these uppity bastards? They needed him as badly as he needed them—worse, maybe.

“Ain’t buyin’ nothin’,” Maxwell said.

Miz Lucretia Borgia sighed. She stood at the side of her master’s chair, her hands folded beneath her kitchen apron. From where she stood she could not discern quality or lack of it in the slaver’s coffle. She had hoped to stir Master Warren’s imagination, to get his mind off his grief. She saw his sorrow went too deeply to be eased so readily.

“Mayhap you got somethin’ I could afford to buy,” Shoat suggested. “Nothin’ too fancy. Somethin’ mayhap you want to get shet of. Cost is a prime consideration, of course. Cain’t be too costive. Cash is always a problem, you know.” Shoat tried to laugh again.

Maxwell opened his whiskered mouth to speak sharply and finally, to end the interview, but then something buzzed at the fringes of his mind, and he stopped. He turned his head and glared up at Miz Lucretia Borgia. “Thinkin’ I’d fo’git, wasn’t you? Hopin’ I’d fo’git ’bout that tad Tige. An’ I tole you to remind me.”

“Jes’ waitin’, Masta. Thought maybe you’d want to see if’n Mr. Shoat had anythin’ to trade and somethin’ to boot, of course,” Lucretia Borgia whispered, bending close to the master’s ear.

From the foot of the steps the trader watched them narrowly, straining to overhear the tense exchange between master and slavewoman.

“You send to round up that Tige,” Maxwell ordered in a taut whisper.

Wincing, Miz Lucretia Borgia nodded. She went to the end of the porch and summoned Napoleon from the crowd of Falconhurst slaves lined out from the rear of the house toward the barn. She knelt and whispered to the big man, “Want you to find Tige, Pole. If’n he ask you why I wants him, you say you don’t know. What-

ever, don't say nothin' 'bout no slave trader. . . . That Tige one bright chile. He hard to fool. . . ."

She returned to the chair where Maxwell sat and resumed her post beside him. Maxwell leaned forward and spoke with clear reluctance. "I tell you what, Mr. Trader. You got one or two prime animals—I mean prime now . . . I won't no way tolerate you wastin' my time with culls . . . I might look at 'em. Look, mind you. Look don't mean buy."

"I have a couple boys bring well water and clabber and hoe cakes for your coffle," Miz Lucretia Borgia said. "You jes' leave 'em set out theah where they is."

"That mighty kindly of you, Auntie," Shoat said.

"Masta Warren don't nevah send nobody 'way from Falconhurst hungry an' thirsty," Lucretia Borgia said. "He been feelin' poorly lately. He mean no harm."

"An' you don't need no way to apologize for me, nigger wench," Warren said. He sat straighter in his chair, his pale eyes glittering with rage.

He did not move even when Shoat crossed the yard and returned with a light-brown-skinned youth who looked to be about seventeen and was built like a god. Miz Lucretia Borgia caught her breath. She had never expected to see such a specimen in Shoat's coffle. She even wondered, as Master Warren had dared to ask aloud, where had Shoat stolen this fancy black?

"This here my prime, my best, my piece of resistance," Shoat said, smiling with pride. "Would you care to come down here and inspect him up close, Mr. Maxwell, suh?"

Warren Maxwell did not move. Lucretia Borgia recognized the way the old man tensed at the sight of the beautiful Negro boy. Maxwell had spent his life breeding and selling blacks; sick at heart as he was, he could not turn his back on perfection.

Miz Lucretia Borgia suffered no such reluctance about showing her interest in the boy. She went down the steps, studying the youth narrowly, from head to toe. She winced slightly, thinking that this slave somehow

recalled Mede, the Mandingo whom Ham had slain. Since Master Warren refused to have little Tige on the place because he looked like Ham, he might not want another excellent specimen to remind him of Mede so soon after the tragedy. Still, she did not intend to be cheated of the closest kind of inspection of this young stallion. "What's he called?" she said to Shoat.

The slaver glanced at Lucretia Borgia and then crooked his neck, peering up at Maxwell unmoving, but leaning forward, in his chair. Maxwell said in a cold, sharp tone, "You can deal with Lucretia Borgia. You deals with her, you deals with me. . . . Leastwise, whilst I'se stove up like this here."

Shoat nodded and said, "Calls him Satyr. Got papers on him too. He bring a lot of money in New Orleans vendue."

Miz Lucretia Borgia didn't even bother to deny this. One haggled over slaves by pointing out flaws, in the politest tone, of course, by subtly denigrating the animal while remaining most hospitable. But there was no sense belaboring what anyone could see; this was a prime and fancy young stud; he would be the showpiece of any auction, New Orleans to Natchez.

God, the boy did look a lot like Mede the Mandingo. Not as tall, maybe a shade less perfect, but outstanding in every way. Satyr stood unmoving, staring into nothingness, perhaps gazing back into the lost places of his own ancestry. She saw that he was two or three inches shorter than Mede had been, perhaps an even six feet tall. His deep warm brown skin was almond-smooth, his cheeks faintly flushed with blood pumped from a strong young heart. His eyes were large and wide-set, under straight brows and a good forehead. The bridge of his nose was raised slightly and his round nostrils flared. His teeth looked unbroken and regular, his lips full but not protruding. His lower jaw was squared, his chin firm. A mat of coarse black hair grew like a cap on the crown of his head.

That head was regal and barbaric at the same time,

like some primitive tribal ruler, powerful and confident, with violence tamped down inside that calm exterior.

"Tell him to take off his shirt," Miz Lucretia Borgia said without taking her eyes off the youth.

Satyr shed his denim shirt as smoothly as a cobra might shed its skin. The sun gleamed in the firm, unblemished flesh of the muscular shoulders and thick, corded chest. His paps stood like dark coins on the gold crags of supple tendons. The muscles of his biceps rippled when he moved his arms; long ropes seemed to undulate from elbow to wrist. His hands were not large, but they were long-fingered and perfect. Miz Lucretia Borgia longed to touch him, to test the temper and hardness of that musculature.

She did not move, but she was aware that her master was no longer able to disguise his own rabid interest in this buck. He could not resist the lure of perfect black flesh, and this appeared to be a kind of perfection, beauty and grace and suppleness, and that most precious asset of all, transient youth. Satyr wasn't even full-grown yet, but he was approaching the most valuable days of his existence.

Maxwell stood up on the porch, reluctant to release the agony that nurtured him and kept Ham close to him, but unwilling to be left behind at this unusual moment. You didn't see a perfect specimen like this very often. He caught Mem's arm and half staggered down the steps into the sunlight to join the party.

He studied the youth a long time before he spoke. "He look pretty good," he admitted at last. "Drop his pants. I wants to find the flaw."

"Flaw, sir?" Shoat's voice rang with an authority it had lacked until now.

"I means to finger him," Maxwell said. "If'n he got flaws, I find 'em. He look perfect, but he got to be flawed somehow. Else why would you have him in a sorry coffle like this heah?"

"No call to be insultin', suh," Shoat said. "I come

out of my way to let you see this fancy buck. I try to do you a favor and you repay by insultin' me."

Maxwell shrugged. "Did you steal him?" he inquired over his shoulder.

Shoat caught his breath. He was torn between ordering Satyr to redon his shirt and getting out of here. But he hesitated. He had the old bastard squirming like a bass on a hook. And the servants were just watering and feeding his herd. There was little to be gained by protecting his good name in some fractious action that could not be undone. "I got papers on him, suh, as I explained to yo' black woman heah."

"Tell him I say drop his pants."

Shoat ordered Satyr to unbutton the fly of his ragged osnaburg pants. The garment slid along the burnished flesh to his bare feet.

A moment of stunned silence marked the solemnity and shock of the extraordinary moment. Mem made a faint hurt sound deep in his throat. Miz Lucretia Borgia stood, not breathing, and unaware that she was holding her breath. She thought she had seen everything, and she was amazed and fascinated. She had heard of men being built like this, but she had never believed it, setting it down as old-maid fantasizing. Well, this was no fantasy. This was flesh and muscle and blood.

"My God almighty," Maxwell whispered, awed. "Will you look at the way this nigger bastid's hung. Expect to see a cock like that on a jackass, but no human got any right to be built that way. Still, this here proves nobody can rightfully say a nigger's a human being. Like I always say, they jus' animals what can talk. And this here proves it."

"He's a beauty." Shoat's voice was soft and confident.

"He more'n that," Maxwell said. "He a purentee stallion, that's what he is. What he goin' been when he gits his full growth? Bet that dong hang into the phosphate when he sits in a shit house. An' them balls. Will you look at them balls?"

Nobody said anything, but everyone stared in fascina-

tion at Satyr's testicles, proud and full between his thighs, pendulant in leathery brown sacks. Satyr's young face flushed. He was not used yet to being forced to strip down in the presence of a lady, even a black one. Still, his genitals were his distinction. Why shouldn't he be proud of the beauty with which nature had endowed him? He suffered as a black man in a white man's world, but he was proud of his manhood. Goddamned proud. He stood, head up, letting them feast their gazes upon him.

With Mem supporting him Maxwell knelt before the naked black. Satyr held his breath and started like a nervous colt when the white man's hand closed, hefting his cod. "Stand still," Maxwell ordered. He skinned back the youth's penis, exposing the purpled head, working the foreskin. "'Pears normal," he conceded.

"O' course Satyr's normal," Shoat said. "He prime quality, that's all. He a perfect black."

Maxwell shook his head stubbornly. "Got to be somethin' flawin' him, else you wouldn't have him," he persisted. He straightened and spoke over his shoulder. "Mem, you git a lighter'n knot and throw it. Want to see how he run."

Mem found a stick and threw it. Satyr loped after it easily and returned at a smooth but unhurried pace. "I want to see you run," Maxwell said. "Damn it. Run. Won't hurt you none. Now, throw that stick again, Mem."

Mem threw the stick farther this time, toward the mountain of fieldstones beyond the house. This time Satyr ran, streaking across the yard naked and returning swiftly and gracefully. By now the entire slave population and Shoat's own exhausted herd were crouched forward, watching in fascination.

Maxwell could find nothing to fault in the youth. He tottered backward and sat on one of the lower plank steps, panting in his exertion.

"Come heah, boy," he said. Satyr approached the

white man cautiously. "Turn around," Maxwell ordered, "bend over and spread the cheeks of your ass."

"Right in yo' face, Masta?" the youth protested.

"Don't you ask me no questions, boy. You do what I say. I say when I want talk from you."

Satyr flushed slightly but turned, facing away from the plantation owner.

Pleased, Satyr saw that the colossal amazon in the red turban was staring at him avidly, with hunger and thirst and greed glittering in her olive-black eyes. She was a magnificent woman and he concentrated on her; it gave him pleasure that she didn't even try to hide the way she wanted him. One could almost see her mouth watering.

He gasped when Maxwell moistened the middle finger of his right hand and worked it deeply into his anus. "Stand still," Maxwell ordered, working his finger back and forth.

Satyr bit down on his underlip to keep from crying out loud. He felt blood gushing into his penis, jerking it upward, rigid and quivering. That finger massaged his prostate and Satyr was helpless to resist. His slender hips bucked and he ejaculated in great spurts.

He sagged in shame as the white man removed his finger, wiping it on his pants leg. He expected roars of taunting laughter from the gathered masses of blacks. But there was not a sound. A strange, fragile silence stretched across the farm as white and black paid silent homage to excellence.

"Reckon this buck got flaws, I cain't find 'em," Maxwell said in a sharp, self-deprecating tone. He got up and tottered back up the steps to his chair on the shaded gallery.

V

For a long time silence hung crisp and fragile in the atmosphere. Maxwell toppled into his rocker and sagged there at an odd angle, one leg extended straight, the other twisted under him slightly. He continued to gaze down at the bare slave boy. Shoa't's coffle crouched silently in the shade of tupelos at the head of the lane. The Falconhurst blacks lounged across the perimeter of the grassless barnyard, intrigued, fascinated. They watched the naked youth without speaking.

The cloudless heavens glittered in midmorning stillness, and from one horizon to another the sunlight spread, blazing pitilessly and blindingly white.

Miz Lucretia Borgia remained unmoving. She flicked drops of perspiration from her eyebrows and glanced from the naked boy to Master Warren sprawled in his chair. She smiled inwardly; she ought to get in out of this sun. It was hotter than the andirons of hell out here in the shadeless yard, and she was a house Negro, but, looking at Satyr, she didn't give a damn about heat, sweat, or the discomfort of gnats and deerflies.

She wanted that boy—in every good, pleasant, and rewarding sense of that word. She had no idea what such an extraordinary specimen was doing in this coffle—perhaps she never would know—but since destiny had

sent him here, she hoped Master Warren would not permit obstinacy to stand in the way of good business acumen. This boy Satyr could improve any bloodline. Still, she knew what was nagging at Master Warren. He was convinced something was badly wrong with the perfect-looking youth and he wanted to find out what it was. This suddenly became the most important matter in the mind of the stubborn slave breeder. More even than he hated the idea of losing a profitable deal, he hated and despised the idea of being tricked or cheated. It didn't make sense that an animal like this Satyr would be in Shoat's coffle. This troubled Maxwell so badly that it overrode every other consideration.

"Well, suh," Shoat said. He smiled and rubbed his hands together with some small violence. He nodded and approached Maxwell. He paused at the foot of the steps, not daring to climb to the veranda unless invited. "What you think?"

Maxwell rocked a moment. "I think there is something fishy about this whole business. I jes' don't know what it is."

"I got a fine bargain here fo' you, Mr. Maxwell, suh," Shoat said. "I hopes you can see that."

"Or else you're fixin' to gull me good," Maxwell said, waving his arm.

Shoat drew in a deep breath, his chest swelling like a blowfish, but he said nothing.

Maxwell stared over their heads at the mountain of fieldstones out beyond the house, stones gathered by slaves when other work was slow, and piled there to be used by Ham to build the fine new mansion they both dreamed of. *Oh, Ham! Wish you was here, son, to help me. You'd spot the trickery right off. Ain't no thievin' slave trader what can deceive my Ham. . . .*

Maxwell straightened in his chair and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. Shoat sighed, relieved that the old bastard hadn't wriggled all the way off the hook yet.

"See that there stone pile yonder?" Maxwell said.

"Want this boy Satyr to bring stones from that pile and run 'em back."

Shoat hesitated, scowling. He shaded his eyes with his arm and squinted toward the mountain of boulders. "What kind o' stones?" he said. "Some mighty brawny rocks out there."

"Want him to start easy," Maxwell said, nodding. "Stones 'bout size of his haid, and then gittin' bigger till he cain't heft it no mo'. Is that askin' too much? If'n it is, you can jes' take yo' trash and git on down the road."

"Ain't askin' too much, but I cain't see no sense at all in strainin' the boy."

"He jes' a randy lad. Won't strain him. Or is that what's the matter, Mr. Shoat? He harborin' a bad back?"

"Nothin' wrong with his back. Not yet. I jes' got no wish to see him harmed liftin' them boulders—"

"An' runnin' with 'em," Maxwell persisted.

"Runnin'? Runnin' and liftin'? You tryin' to harm my stock?"

"I tryin' to find out why you got a specimen what look like him in the fust place, suh. If he gotten a bad back, I wants to know it."

"I warrants to you he ain't."

"Sorry. Yo' word should be good enough fo' me. But this time hit ain't. I wants to see him run with them boulders."

"Tha's easy for you to sit there and demand. But what if you rupture somethin' on my prize animal? What then, Mistah Maxwell? You goin' to buy him anyhow?"

"Nevah say I goin' to buy him in the fust place."

"Then we'll jes' go on down the road, suh. Satyr rupture somethin' in he belly, I stuck with him. You ain't."

Maxwell's sarcasm clawed at the dealer. "The boy rupture jes' pickin' up a few stones, he ain't wuth much nohow, be he?"

"Don't want him hurt," Shoat said, shaking his head.

"But you do wants to sell him, don't you?"

“If’n Satyr carry these heah stones, you warrant to buy him?”

Maxwell stared down at the slave trader and grinned faintly. “Let’s see him fetch stones fust” was all he said.

Shoat nodded reluctantly and Satyr raced across the yard to the mountain of piled rocks. He was beginning to enjoy himself. It was less than painful being the total center of attention, even if he was naked before lady folks. They liked to look at him; he could see that, even in the eyes of the red-turbaned amazon. She could hardly take her eyes off him. Aye, God. It felt good. Let ’em stare at him.

He chose a stone twice as big as his head, hefted it easily to his shoulder, and loped back across the yard to the steps. Once there, he stood, gleaming with the sun in his sweat, and grinned up at Maxwell. Then he turned and ran in that easy trot to the stone pile.

The next stone was twice as large as the first. He lifted it easily but carried it against his chest. He ran at exactly the same pace across the yard. Sweat streaked down from the mat of black hair, puddled along his brows, and seeped over his cheeks. He paused at the steps, as if carrying some kind of tribute for the gnarled old white man on the porch, then turned and ran back.

At the stone pile Satyr hesitated, studying the stones. The one he chose was a boulder wider than his shoulders and twice as thick as his tendoned chest. He bent his knees, knelt, and hefted the boulder. When he turned to run with it, Maxwell waved his arm in a gesture of surrender.

“Hit all right, Satyr,” Shoat yelled across the yard in exultance. “Drap it, boy. Drap it.”

Smiling, Satyr heaved the boulder easily up the incline.

Miz Lucretia Borgia watched Satyr lope smoothly back to where his pants lay on the ground. He waited, but no one told him to put them on. He was covered with sweat, great marbles streaked along his rib cage from his

armpits. But, Miz Lucretia Borgia thought, the boy surely didn't smell bad. He smelled good.

She glanced toward Master Warren. She wanted to buy this animal; there was no reason, except Maxwell obstinacy and bullheadedness, to pass up this golden opportunity.

Slowly, she went up the steps to where Maxwell sat. He sagged back in his chair, seeming suddenly devoid of interest in anything around him, all his thoughts turned inward.

Miz Lucretia Borgia stood with her back to the yard. She spoke in a soft tone. "Masta don't want to pass up a fine fancy buck like this heah, does he?"

Maxwell looked up at her, his eyes pained and distracted. He frowned, then shook his head. He waved his arm. "You know what best, Lucretia. . . . You wants him, you buy . . . or don't buy. . . . It make no nevah mind to me, one way or the other."

Holding her breath and trying to conceal the anxiety and delight burning behind her black eyes, Miz Lucretia Borgia nodded and, turning, went back into the yard. She went close to where Satyr stood. She felt the slave dealer's gaze riveted on her; she was most aware of Mem's anguished eyes, following every move she made, murderously.

She said, concealing her reluctance, "You can put yo' clothes back on now, Satyr."

"Yes, ma'am." He bent down, took up the worn garments, shook the sand out of them, and pulled them on.

Miz Lucretia Borgia stroked the boy's biceps, forced his lips open, and examined his regular, white teeth. Oh, God, she could find not the faintest flaw. She felt her heartbeats increase. She turned away and faced the slaver. "What you askin' fo' a young boy like this what ain't even at his full growth?"

Shoat glanced again toward where Maxwell sat on the shaded porch, but saw he had to deal with the black woman. He not only reconciled himself quickly to this

situation; he saw in his mind how he could take advantage of it. Wasn't any day in the week any black woman could outsmart Putney Shoat.

"He bring three thousand at vendue in New Orleans," Shoat suggested.

"We ain't in N'Orleans, suh," Miz Lucretia Borgia said, shaking her head. "Look 'round. We overrun with strappin' black boys. Wants me to call forty or so over? We can lose yo' boy among 'em in a hurry."

Shoat winced, growing angry. "Well, my God. I never heard the like. You want my boy or not?"

"At the right price we might takes him off yo' hands."

"Well, why don't you name what you consider a fair price?"

Miz Lucretia spoke without hesitation. "Well, you got a pretty beat-up-lookin' coffle. Three or four Falconhurst lads—maybe ten to twelve—make it look mighty spry and fancy. Next farms you go to, you got somethin' to show—sprouts from Falconhurst itself."

Shoat swallowed hard. He knew he was being offered a deal that was imminently fair. Just owning four Falconhurst boys would give him new status, a whole new stature. In his mind he could see himself scrubbing up his herd, making them look sharp, the beginning of good times. He tried to conceal his satisfaction. "I'd have to have some boot," he said.

"Why you talkin' boot when you gits four Falconhurst boys in trade?"

Shoat paled slightly. He shook his head; he knew he was dealing with an extraordinary woman; it didn't matter about the color of her skin. He said, "I got mouths to feed, ma'am. Some of 'em needin' fresh clothes when they bein' showed . . . I soon go out'n business I don't get enough boot to feed my herd as I go."

Miz Lucretia Borgia exhaled heavily, then glanced toward where Satyr stood watching her, unblinking. She licked her tongue across her lips. Finally nodding, she said, "Give you three gold eagles boot. But no' more. Ain't no sense hagglin'."

Shoat nodded. And it was accomplished. Miz Lucretia Borgia felt her heart leap in her magnificent bosom. She looked at Satyr from the corner of her eye. "You belongs to me now," Miz Lucretia whispered inwardly, exultantly.

She didn't realize she had spoken aloud until she saw the teasing way Satyr smiled at her. . . .

A child's violent screaming broke across the silence and sent blue jays chattering in the hedges. Miz Lucretia Borgia heeled around and watched Napoleon striding toward her with young Tige under his arm like a sack of cane sugar. Tige kicked and flailed his arms. His head back, he let the protesting wails spew out of him.

Pole set the child down in the hot sand before Miz Lucretia. Tige went on raging for a moment. "Won't go. Cain't sells me. I belongs heah. I belongs to Falconhurst. I belongs to Masta Ham. I won't go. Cain't make me go nowhere."

Recognizing Miz Lucretia Borgia, Tige buried his brown-haired head against her, clinging fiercely to her legs. "Please, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am. They goin' sell me down the river. Please tell 'im. I Masta Ham's own git. Please, Miz Lucretia. . . ."

Her jaw hard, Miz Lucretia jerked her head up and glared at Napoleon. The huge black man shook his head. "I didn't say nothin' to him, Miz Lucretia. Didn't have to. That one smart little black boy."

Miz Lucretia Borgia scrubbed her hand in Tige's hair. He turned up his tear-streaked face and she felt a stricture in her heart. It was as if she looked down into the face of her own Master Ham when she had first arrived at Falconhurst from the Macklin farm. Yo' the spite-an'-image of yo' pa, she thought, grief choking her throat.

She did not bother to glance toward Master Warren on the shaded gallery. The breeder had made up his mind; nothing would alter it. To the Maxwells and to all the white people they knew, the slaves were chattel and nothing more. The blacks were animals, like valuable

cattle and irresponsible, unfeeling beasts that could talk but were reared and conditioned for one reason only—for sale at the highest possible prices. They were never cruel to their blacks; it was as unprofitable and short-sighted to abuse Negroes as to abuse hogs or horses. But on the other hand, any slave was less than human even if it had been sired by the young Master Ham himself. Neither Master Warren nor his son saw Tige as anything more than a light-skinned black to be treated as all other slaves were treated.

She bit back her tears. It did not seem fair. Pole had put it in words. Tige was one smart little black boy. He was Master Ham's natural son. It seemed totally wrong that Tige should labor and die in the blazing sun of some unknown cotton field with all the riches known to southern aristocracy stored here in Falconhurst soil.

Miz Lucretia Borgia forced herself to speak calmly to Pole. She told him to take Satyr out to the barn and have him scrubbed down and deloused, then to the kitchen, where he would be fed and given fresh clothing. "While they doin' that," she said, "you bring some lads 'round twelve-year-old for this here white gen'mum to inspect. He goin' to be takin' four of 'em with him."

Shoat scrubbed his hand in Tige's hair. He grinned. "Be glad to take this here light-skinned critter," he said. "He bring extry anywhere's I show him."

Miz Lucretia nodded but did not speak. She felt Tige's body racked with his trembling, and his arms gripped her legs tighter. She had to shift and adjust herself to keep from falling under his violent embrace. She stroked his face. "Don't you fret, chile. . . . You goin' be all right."

Tige only clutched her tighter. Oh, God, she thought, how Master Ham used to cling to me like this when he was hurt and frightened—and just this size.

Suddenly she heard a wail from the gallery and Master Warren burst into tears. With Tige clinging to her skirt, Miz Lucretia heeled around and ran up the steps. "Masta. Masta Warren honey. What the matter?"

The aging man sobbed, his nose leaking, tears streaming into his patchy beard. He shook his head.

Miz Lucretia felt her heart lift hopefully. Maybe, despite all his prejudices and beliefs and long-held convictions, the grief of this child may have touched the master's heart and changed his mind. Nothing less would be justice in God's world. The child was Master Ham's natural son, as much his own child as poor little cross-eyed Sophie.

Maxwell's tears stopped and his voice shook with rage. "Wants you to gits this black chile out'n my sight. . . . This heah Shoat man ain't ready to leave yet, you have Pole take this chile down to the barn and tie him up till Mr. Shoat ready to go. Git him out of my sight."

"Why, Masta honey. What's the matter?"

"Hit breakin' my heart," Maxwell raged. "Havin' to look at this black imp what is the spite-an'-image of my own dearest son Ham when he was that age. 'Tain't right. 'Tain't fair. 'Tain't decent fo' a poor sufferin' man like me to have to look on no black wretch what brings to mind my own son what's gone like he was daid. You heard me, woman. Git this black critter out'n my sight. Don't nevah want to look on his face again. . . ."

Within another hour Shoat had his four black boys in trade, plus three gold eagles, and was out of sight along the Benson trace. The blue-hazed stillness settled again over the farm. The slaves returned to their cabins and their chores; the yard grew quiet. Miz Lucretia Borgia worked harder than ever, because every time she stopped to rest, she saw poor little Tige's stricken face behind her eyes, and her heart broke. She had felt she could not endure the pain when the Maxwells sold off her and her twins Alph and Omega to that Mr. Roche of New Orleans and La Allouette Plantation. But the pain at the loss of little Tige was intense. So many memories stirred and whirled inside her mind. The way Tige had followed Master Ham around the yard, like a tiny shadow, Master Ham's

own image, striding in his own footsteps. She wept, too, for what Tige could have been with a little care and attention. He could have been the fanciest of Falconhurst bucks, smarter, sharper of mind, clearer of eye, ambitious, and intelligent. Only God knew now where the child would end.

By four o'clock that same afternoon the first visitors arrived from neighboring plantations, drawn by news of the extraordinary animal Warren Maxwell had been smart enough to buy from an itinerant slave trader.

No one ever successfully explained how word spread so swiftly in rural areas. There was no special means of communication; the roads were seldom used, and yet gossip and rumor and occasionally even the truth flashed across the countryside more swiftly and more devastatingly than swamp fires.

Lewis Gassaway's plantation was on the other side of Benson. Doc Redfield lived with his newlywed Widow Johnson in the old Johnson place over on Seven Mile Road. Yet the two men arrived on saddle horses, riding together, showing their excitement and curiosity.

At the sight of his old friends Master Warren managed to stir himself from apathy and order drinks served immediately on the gallery. The three friends sat fanning themselves, Gassaway using his battered planter's hat and sitting on the edge of his chair.

"Hear you got yourself a new breedin' stud, 'most as fancy as Mede hisself," Gassaway said, smiling. He held his glass of corn whiskey neat with stubby, broken-nailed fingers, callused by hard work. His oversized Adam's apple rose and fell in his throat when he swallowed. Deep creases around his eyes and mouth seemed to reveal a life of self-indulgence and self-will. He was a tall, thin man, the third generation to live in the old colonial mansion. Like the Maxwells, the Gassaways knew themselves to be the elite. They were never headed, seldom even crossed by any man. They accepted deference as their due.

Miz Lucretia Borgia served their drinks and then leaned

against the clapboard wall, hands folded under her apron, listening to them. Usually, she would allow Mem to serve drinks when company came, but by nature she was the most curious and inquisitive of women. She liked to hear everything of interest that might be going on in the area within the ken of these prominent white gentlemen.

Though she had no particular reason for her distaste, Miz Lucretia Borgia disliked Doc Redfield as heartily as she did any white person who came on the place. He came often; he was Warren Maxwell's dearest friend. They had been friends all their lives. Redfield was a veterinarian. He treated the illnesses of all the Falconhurst black stock. Maxwell would not permit the medical practitioner from Benson on Falconhurst land, calling him "that clap-carryin' son of a bitch."

She gazed at the vet for a moment, nose crinkling. Doc Redfield's hands were gnarled and liver-spotted, with a thin line of funereal black edging his nails. Prosperity—which had come with his recent marriage to Widow Johnson—had imposed a wider expanse of pot-belly to his narrow-shouldered frame. Most of the time he wore the top button of his fly loose to relieve the pressure of gas on his stomach. A roll of fat protruded from under the bottom of his flowered waistcoat. His sparse red whiskers, streaked with gray, were stained with tobacco juice at one side of his mouth, and his few remaining teeth were only blackened stubs. She knew his breath to be foul.

She listened to the three men discussing the new slave, Satyr. Thinking about the supple, clean-limbed youth, Miz Lucretia found her mouth twisting with disdain. These puny, ugly, cock-strutting white men. How ugly they were, these kings of the earth. How easy it was to despise them for their vanity and their arrogance.

They discussed the merits of a strong-thewed young slave for breeding purposes for a long time, consuming most of a jug of corn whiskey. Doc Redfield shook his head. "Buyin' a fine stud is good, Warren. But I'se a

mite disappointed. I come ridin' all the way over heah hopin' you had bought at least a couple of squab-titted females fo' me to inspect." He winked and nudged Maxwell with his elbow.

Warren smiled indulgently at his long-time friend. "I reckon Lucretia Borgia can round you up a couple of our own wenches to take in that back room yonder and 'xamine to yo' heart's content."

"Need to count them pussy hairs," Redfield chortled, nudging Warren again.

"'Course you do, Doc. Of course you do." Maxwell nodded, smiling. "Wants to be sure them wenches is at they best if we goin' mate them up to our new stud, eh?"

"Sounds reasonable to me." Doc Redfield went off into paroxysms of laughter.

Miz Lucretia Borgia snorted her disapproval. It was disgraceful, that's what it was, the way Master Warren let that dirty old man finger every black woman that came within arm's reach. She would have put her foot down hard, ending the practice, but she knew she was powerless against this white alliance of lifelong friends. Still, she despised the horny old vet who couldn't leave the wenches alone.

Doc Redfield heard her muffled disapproval and jerked his head around. He grinned widely. "Now, Lucretia Borgia. Don't you go gettin' high-falutin' and sanctimonious on me. Be easy on an old man, Lucretia." He laughed, nodding. "You'd be a lot more tolerant of me if'n you knowed how much help I need to hop in my widder's bed, with her face warts and leg moles an' all. . . ."

Lying in her bed a little after midnight, Miz Lucretia Borgia heard Mem moan from his cot under the rafters.

She sucked in a deep breath, wincing. She was too tired to deal with tiresome Mem after her long and eternal day. She had had to locate wenches for Doc Redfield's leisurely inspection in a downstairs guest bedroom. She

closed the door on that procedure. She did not even want to know what went on in there. She did warn the vet that these were likely the mares that would be covered by the new young stallion named Satyr. What the doctor did then had medical equivalency in her own mind, anyhow. How she despised that horny old lecher.

And she was exhausted after putting old Master Warren to bed too. She had hoped that the excitement might rouse him from his lethargy. He had for a little while evinced interest in the buying of a handsome young fancy. He had to face up to his grief, put it aside, and take up his life again. But she did not see how she could help him to do this. Despite the busy morning, the visit with his old cronies, she had helped him up to his bed only to see him sink again into despondency.

Well, she was too tired to care about Mem's petty woes. If the trifling Mem thought he wanted sex, there was his fist. She had nothing for him but contempt. She turned on her side, facing away from the cot beneath the eaves.

Memnon spoke in the darkness. She did not know how long it had been since she had turned her back on him, but from the choked quality of his voice she could tell that Mem had been crying silently over there on his cot.

"Cain't wait, can you?" she heard Mem whimper.

Sighing, feeling the flush of frustration burn upward through her, Miz Lucretia Borgia turned on her mattress and lay staring at the unceiled roof. Darkness smoked in the room; she could barely discern Mem on his cot in the shadows.

"Cain't wait to git yo' hands on him, can you?" he accused in desperate agony.

"What you talkin' 'bout, nigger?" She clenched her fists at her sides. Mem was right. She burned liquidly at her thighs; she could hardly wait. But this was her business and no concern of Mem's. She knew that the tormented Mem was talking about Satyr, just as she was daydreaming about him and aching with an agonizing

sweetness. But she was not going to make this any easier for Mem either. If he wanted to bring Satyr's name into this room with them, he would have to speak it aloud. She would not help him.

"You know what I talkin' 'bout." Mem spoke through a throat taut with agony. "I talkin' 'bout that nigger boy you all hot for. That new one you bought fo' yo'self today. You might fool the masta and the rest. You don't fool me. I see you. You act like a bitch in heat. . . . I seen mares in the field itchin' for it act better'n you are behavin' right now."

She exhaled heavily and kept her voice cold and flat. "You jes' tormentin' yo'self, Mem. Don't blame me 'cause you sick with jealousy. You pizen yo' own mind."

Mem sniffled helplessly. "You think I 'on't know."

"I don't care what you think, Mem."

"You my woman," he said, grief-stricken and helpless.

"That a fool idea you ought to git out of yo' head."

He whimpered aloud and she knew he had the back of his hand pressed over his thick lips to stifle the sobs. "Really goin' to mount him, fust chance you git, ain't you?"

For a long beat she was silent. She heard mice in the closed-off attic beyond their room. She heard the faint whisper of a night breeze in the tupelos. She said, "Listen to me, Memnon. Ain't no sense talkin' 'bout this. Ain't none of it none of yo' nevah mind. What I do—or don't do—ain't none of yo' business."

"You goin' fuck him, ain't you? And you won't let me touch you."

"Mem, all I can tell you is you ain't built like this new boy. Nevah was. Nevah will be. Lyin' quiet, he three times yo' size at yo' best. But when you built like him, then you can start to tell me what I can do and what I cain't do. Shut up now and git some sleep. Ain't goin' he'p you none to lie awake all night, tormentin' both us about it."

VI

Miz Lucretia Borgia was restless all the next day. Early in the morning she made arrangements to put the new boy, Satyr, in a cabin alone with the beautiful marabon girl Dianna. Usually, Miz Lucretia Borgia stayed close by to monitor these designated matings. Sometimes the couples were far less than congenial and had to be encouraged with cane whips to perform, especially if the wench was virginal and the stud unknown to her. One truth she had learned, the wench often had to be literally raped the first time, but never afterward; the buck might grow tired, but the female discovered appetites she had not even known she possessed. Often it was amusing to listen to the moanings and the wailings and the screams and sometimes the male cursing when a wench, driven out of her gourd, closed her teeth on the soft tendon of his shoulder. She did not want to be near for this coupling. She left Big Lucy to oversee the episode and she returned to the house, where she threw herself feverishly into cleaning and scrubbing. The servant girls under her immediate command complained aloud; they had never been worked so hard before.

The day wore itself away. It seemed to Miz Lucretia Borgia that never had each hour been filled out so pre-

cisely to its fullest sixty minutes. The sunset seemed suspended over the countryside for a purpled eternity. When finally she did go to bed and Mem whined to be permitted to pester her, she allowed him in under her covers with her, much to his stunned amazement. But when he proved himself flimsy and inept, she shoved him out onto the floor and warned him to stay away from her on pain of mortal agony.

At five the next morning she was up, dressed, and alone in her big lye-scrubbed kitchen. She boiled a huge pot of coffee and sat, shoulders sagging, sipping the fluid, black.

The door to the rear stoop opened and Miz Lucy stood there. Lucy was an aging Mandingo, built on a massive scale. She was so large and heavy-boned that in comparison Miz Lucretia seemed of ordinary stature. Lucy was one of the few pure-blooded Mandingos in America. She was well aware of this; she had overheard it hundreds of times when the Maxwells boasted of her and her children. She and her daughter Big Pearl had been purchased from an impecunious slave breeder who specialized in Mandingan bloodlines, a Mr. Wilson of Coign Plantation. Because Mr. Wilson had fallen upon hard times, he had been forced to sell off most of his Mandingan herd, especially those of reproductive ages. Needing more animals, he had been driven to the extremity of mating Lucy to her own sire. Two colts had issued from this coupling, a son, whom Mr. Wilson had kept despite his desperate need for cash, and Big Pearl, whom he had sold at top prices to the Maxwells when young Ham became obsessed with the idea of raising Mandingan purebreds. The women were amazons, the men were the most perfectly formed of males, and most of them giants. Ham had been certain that if he could raise purebred Mandingo stallions, he could realize a fortune, taking purses in the bare-fisted Negro fighting that was a craze sweeping the South.

Lucy was almost six feet tall, massive in the shoulders, and remarkable across her bust. She wore a gray

bandanna wrapped about her hair and an ankle-length cotton shift. She was barefoot. There was in the woman's dark eyes a smearing of cold tragedy that did not lighten even when she smiled.

Lucy did not bother to smile now. This was unfortunate, because she was by nature a happy, gregarious woman who laughed easily and loudly, her whole body quivering with pleasure. She was beautiful when she laughed, and people gazed at her awed when she put her head back and let the laughter pour out of her. But she felt she was a victim of life's casual and uncaring cruelty. She had been torn away from her son Mede, who was a couple of plantings older than Big Pearl. She had been taken away from her father and brought to this strange plantation. But she had the mysterious, miraculous resiliency of her race; she adjusted. As the African blacks had adjusted to the white man and his slavery and persisted and multiplied despite it, she reconciled herself to her new life. She had been made overseer of the big house, and Pearl grew healthy and strong, and Big Lucy was almost content. Then Lucretia Borgia had arrived, bought by the old master. She was a house servant and was placed under Lucy's supervision. It seemed to Lucy a matter of days and she was being supervised, and finally displaced by Lucretia Borgia, a woman of immense ambition, incredible drive, and a willingness to crawl and fawn before her white masters. It wasn't too long before Miz Lucy had been moved out of the big house altogether and Miz Lucretia Borgia was in charge of the vast farm. It did not matter to Lucy that her cooking had been poor, her housekeeping slaphazard, her discipline lax. She saw only that Lucretia Borgia had sneaked in and uprooted her, and she hated her. That hatred ate at her down in her cabin; whenever she had nothing else to occupy her mind, her thoughts turned sourly to Lucretia Borgia's betrayal. Hatred had soured the big woman. She hated Lucretia Borgia, and she would go on hating her until one of them died. Miz Lucy

could force herself to be civil to the other woman, but nothing more.

Miz Lucretia Borgia looked up and smiled. Inwardly, Big Lucy raged at that smiling. It was easy for Lucretia to smile; she had everything, while Lucy had nothing, living forgotten down in that cabin with Big Pearl and Ole Mr. Wilson and Mede's skull on the mantel, the only mortal remains of her exquisite son. "Mornin', Miz Lucy. Come in and have coffee an' set a spell."

"Thankee. I will." Miz Lucy went to a cabinet, found an earthenware mug, which she brimmed full of coffee. She sipped at it and allowed her nose to crinkle just faintly. "Still don't put in no drap of salt, do you?"

"Masta like it this way," Miz Lucretia Borgia said.

"Does he?" the older woman inquired in her most civil tone. "Or be he like the rest of us 'round heah these days, do he take what he can git?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia took a deep sip of her coffee and did not bother replying to the cantankerous older woman. There was no love lost between them, but Miz Lucretia was far too busy to carry a grudge.

"Been waitin' till I seed a light in yo' kitchen," Miz Lucy said. She sat down across the bare, scoured table from Lucretia. "Slept in kinda late this mawnin', didn't you?"

Miz Lucretia shrugged. "Cain't all of us be early risers like you, Miz Lucy."

Miz Lucy nodded emphatically. "Tha's what's ailing this heah younger generation, all right. No git-up. When I was a gal, we had the cows milked and the chores done by this time of the mawnin'."

"How are things with you and Big Pearl?" Miz Lucretia inquired.

Miz Lucy moved her shoulders in a massive shrug. "'Bout well as could be expected, I reckon, under the conditions."

Miz Lucretia took a deep breath and said, "How are things—twixt that Dianna wench and the new stud?"

"Tha's what I come to talk to you about," Miz Lucy said. "'Fraid I got some bad news for you."

"You mean that Dianna gal won't let Satyr to her?"

"Ain't that at all," Miz Lucy said, looking along her nose. "Matter of fact, that Dianna most willin' an' cooperative. She even talk to some of the ladies 'bout what she could do to excite a man what ain't excited 'bout her jes' layin' there nekkid and wide-open, waitin' for him."

Miz Lucretia set her cup down so hard the coffee sloshed over the brim. "You sayin' this Satyr-boy won't do it?"

"I sayin' he cain't."

"What you mean, he cain't?"

Miz Lucy was almost enjoying herself. She took a long pull at her coffee. "I ain't sayin' he cain't. I sayin' that Dianna girl say he cain't."

"Did she say why he cain't?"

"My Gawd, Lucretia, don't you know *nothin'*?"

Lucretia Borgia laughed coldly. "I reckon I know enough. What I don't know is what's wrong between two pretty young people like Dianna and that Satyr."

"What's wrong is jus' what I'm tellin' you is wrong."

"Oh, that's crazy—you pardon me, Miz Lucy. But Dianna is willing, you say, and Gawd knows every young boy that age is so randy that sheeps and ducks ain't safe 'round him."

Miz Lucy shrugged. "All I know is they is tried all day and all night and that Dianna is fit'n to be tied. That Satyr cain't do nothin'."

"You mean that Satyr boy don't know how?"

"You jes' won't listen, will you? I'm sayin' he limp as a toad, no matter what that Dianna gal do—with her tongue or her mouth or even the feather off a hen's belly."

"I don't believe it."

"You mean you don't want to believe it. Looks like you done bought what Masta Warren purely hates—a queer man."

"That boy's not queer."

"He sho' ain't jus' right, left day an' night with that Dianna girl tryin' everythin' she knows or is tole . . . seems to me what you bought is one of them men what likes only other men."

Miz Lucretia sat there and swallowed back at the hot, soured coffee that gorged up into her throat.

They waited until Mem had helped Master Warren into his blanket-padded chair before a roaring fire in the parlor. They went in then, Miz Lucretia bearing a steaming hot toddy laced with four parts corn whiskey and three parts long sweetening.

He took the toddy and mumbled something unintelligible. When he put his head back to sip at his drink, he saw Miz Lucretia and Miz Lucy standing over his chair. He waited a few moments, but they did not go away.

He waved his arm at them. "Not now. I don't feel like talkin' to you. An' I don't feel like listenin'. . . . Whatever it is, you straighten it out, Lucretia Borgia."

He gazed at them emptily a moment, and it was clear he had spent last night crying over his lost son. His pale eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, the lower lids puffy from pressure of his fingers.

"Don't reckon I can exactly do that, Masta. You bes' heah what Miz Lucy has to say."

"Don't want to listen to Miz Lucy, goddamn it." He jerked his head up, his eyes smoldering with suppressed violence. "You should pardon me, Miz Lucy. No offense intended. I jus' too ill to put my mind to any matters at all. Hope you and your daughter is well, Lucy. How is Big Pearl?"

"Tol'able, suh. Tol'able. An' Ole Mr. Wilson, he doin' fine too."

"That Ole Mr. Wilson no good to me. He got no juices. Big as a mule, that's about what he is. Reckon it comes from bein' too much inbred. His own brother Mede bein' his paw, and him out'n yo' womb, and you Mede's own maw."

"Mede was a fine boy, Masta," Lucy reminded him. "An' my own pa was Mede's daddy."

"Reckon inbreedin' cain't be carried on too far, like with Thoroughbred horses," the old man said. He took another sip of his hot toddy and stared into the fire, letting them know the interview was ended.

"Please, suh, Masta, listen to what Miz Lucy got to say."

Maxwell cursed them both, loudly and explicitly. "Two such pushy bitches as I never see in my life. Don't neither one of you know when to back off and let a man be. Nevah has. God knows why I ain't sold both of you down the river long ago."

"It's about that new boy you buy yestiday," Miz Lucretia persisted.

He cocked his brow. "What I bought? You bought him. I had this heah bad feelin' 'bout him—him bein' in that Shoat's coffle an' all. You bought him."

"Looks like you was right, suh," Miz Lucretia conceded.

The old man flinched slightly, and faint interest flared in his tear-reddened eyes. He gazed at them, aroused despite himself. "What wrong?"

"He cain't git no hard-on," Miz Lucy said.

"What? How you know?"

"That light-skinned Dianna. Prettiest sixteen-year-old we got on this farm. She been with him since last night."

"No mattah what that Dianna gal do, that boy he jes' no way don't want her. He try, and he sweat, she say, but it jus' don't come up, no matter what they do."

Maxwell swore. "Three things I hate and despise on this earth," he said. "Nigger musk in my bed. A gelded animal, and a man what sucks 'round other men."

"Looks like this boy—pretty as he is—jes' don't like females," Miz Lucy said. "He been give every chance."

"Jesus Christ. I thought havin' Ole Mr. Wilson on the farm was enough of these no-good males. Now we got another one."

"I jes' cain't believe it," Miz Lucretia said.

Maxwell sighed and sagged deeper in his chair, losing interest. "Well, I believe it. I seen it before. Too many times. Though more among white men than any of the slaves. Still, it kind of common. We was taken. That no-good robbin' son of a bitch. Had them hackles on the nape of my neck, warnin' me. Should have run the son of a bitch off the place, him and his no-good trash. Next, we'll hear he's spread the epizootic among our herd. Wipe 'em out overnight, I swear to God."

"Maybe it ain't that bad," Miz Lucretia said.

But the master of Falconhurst only sagged deeper in his chair, losing interest and seeking the hurtful memory of his son in the blaze of the hearth fire.

"We be lucky it ain't worse," Miz Lucy said.

Miz Lucretia winced, but held her temper leashed. That damned old Lucy. She was enjoying herself. She even seemed swollen with pleasure. Anything that discomfited her tickled that old amazon. She was delighted with the corner into which Miz Lucretia had painted herself.

"Satyr can't be like Ole Mr. Wilson," Lucretia persisted, even when she knew she risked enraging her master to the point of having her caned, at the least, for talking when he ordered her to be silent.

Rage did wheel and sing around inside Maxwell's skull, but Lucretia had aroused his curiosity too. He wanted to know how she could be certain a man was unlike another simply by looking at him. "An' why not?" he asked in a low tone between clenched teeth.

Miz Lucretia spoke swiftly, trying to get it all said before Master Warren silenced her finally on the subject. "Because, like you say, Ole Mr. Wilson, he Miz Lucy's git, sired by his own brother. Satyr ain't nothin' like that."

"How do you know?"

"Doc Redfield read his papers careful. He say. I ast about what his bloodline was 'fore I bought him."

"Well, we all makes mistakes sometimes." Maxwell sagged deeper into lethargy again. Miz Lucretia Borgia

did not know how she could bring her beloved master out of this despondency if he was not interested in slaves and their bloodlines, something that had occupied him all the days of his life.

"I purentee know Satyr ain't like Ole Mr. Wilson," she said.

"He best not be. If'n I find proof he is, I knock him in the head," Maxwell said from deep within his blankets.

"I going to mate that boy with another wench," Miz Lucretia Borgia said, speaking in desperation off the top of her head. "Tha's what I do. You know, Masta. You hate and despise nigger musk. Lot o' black folks say white folks stink like skunks. . . . This heah Dianna. She a beautiful gal, but she near onto a mulatto. Maybe this boy—without'n him even knowin' it, don't like her bein' so light. . . ."

The master waved his arm, dismissing her. Lucy turned and trudged from the overheated parlor. After a moment Miz Lucretia Borgia turned and followed. She glanced back over her shoulder. Master Warren sagged low on his spine in the rocker, staring unseeingly into the fire. If he did not respond when she spoke about slaves to him, what could she do to rouse him from the miseries? Nothing she said mattered to him. He may have lost thousands of dollars on this latest purchase. Still, he did not care.

VII

Miz Lucretia Borgia gathered ten of the prettiest dark-skinned girls in Miz Lucy's cabin.

She sent Belthazzar and Ole Mr. Wilson out to play. She tried to ignore the perfectly sculptured skull of Mede on the mantel. She also ignored Miz Lucy and Big Pearl. The two huge Mandingan women sat in cane-bottomed chairs near the wall, watching, gape-mouthed.

The girls giggled and trembled alternately. None was over sixteen. They had been told only that Miz Lucretia Borgia wanted to look them over. Instant fantasies had spun in their heads: Miz Lucretia Borgia was looking for new house girls; they would be taught fine stitching, cooking, and plain sewing; they would be removed forever from the threat of labor in the open fields. Or they were going to be sold off the farm, for breeding purposes. None of them was sure just what this meant, except that she would have her own man to cover her as often as she liked. A kind of tamped-down tension crackled in the shadowed cabin.

The front door stood open and a long shaft of sunlight spilled in across the scrubbed floor. Beyond the door the noises of the plantation rose and fell like great breakers on some faraway shore. For the moment they all seemed removed and displaced from it in this taut silence.

Her face stern and cold, Miz Lucretia Borgia ordered the girls to strip down. Not one of them hesitated. There was a tone in Miz Lucretia's voice that made them eager to obey with alacrity.

The young girls dropped their simple cotton shifts about their feet and stood, tense and quivering, their gazes straight ahead. They heard Miz Lucy whisper, "Well, I declare." But none of them looked at her.

Unsmiling, Miz Lucretia Borgia went slowly along the display of naked beauty. She inspected each one, taking her time. She checked the insides of their eyelids, their teeth, their skin for welts or cane scars. She cupped her hands over their breasts. She spoke over her shoulder to Miz Lucy with faint disdain. "Ain't none of them purely titted-out yet."

"They young," Miz Lucy said in an offhand tone. "Most black girls don't have gyascutus titties no how." She spoke in her most civil tone. "Anyway, ain't likely none of them evah be loaded down up front like you is, honey."

Face chilled, Miz Lucretia ignored this thrust from her old enemy. If Miz Lucy derived pleasure and relief from sniding her, so be it. Actually, she even remembered how she had hated Miz Lucy back in those days when their roles had been reversed, when she'd known she was a better cook, a better housekeeper, a better manager, and a hundred times smarter than Miz Lucy, and yet she had to take orders from the slovenly amazon. Let Miz Lucy hate her if it released the angry juices souring inside her. Probably healthier for all of them.

The girls in the line before her smothered giggles and glanced at Miz Lucretia's formidable bosom. Miz Lucretia ignored this too. She ran her hands along their spines, their shoulders, their hands, and the planes of their bellies. She asked each of them the same question: "You busted yet twixt your legs?"

"What you mean, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am?"

"Plain 'nough what I mean. You a virgin any mo'?"

"Do . . . sittin' spraddle acrost Uncle Alvin's lap count?"

"Did Uncle Alvin have his pants on?"

"Yes'm, he did. . . . But he had me kind of open them up to see what he had for me in there."

"And what you found in his pants? You sit down across it?"

"He tried to. . . . Felt good, but hurt too bad too . . . He couldn't . . . Do that count?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia spread her hands. "God knows."

Miz Lucretia Borgia chose a black girl named Ursula. She was willowly and smooth as velvet, slender as a reed, with clear eyes and a lithe way of walking on the balls of her feet. She looked almost like a ballet dancer when she moved. Yet her slender hips were rounded and her pelvis bowed. She would bear children well and easily, Miz Lucretia Borgia thought, and, pretty as she was, her gits should be valuable little colts.

With Ursula, in her shift, scrubbed with soap and her short hair brushed back from her face so she looked like a child fresh from its morning bath, Miz Lucretia plodded through the slave quarters lane. Miz Lucy plodded along beside her, matching step for step. They bore down on the cabin that Satyr had been sharing with the marabon girl Dianna without any results at all.

Miz Lucretia Borgia, squinting against the glare of the sun, went up the plank steps. Each cabin was set on smoothed boulders, with three feet of air space under their flooring; this insured against dampness and humidity. It made the places cooler in the summer. Because the flooring was not ceiled, it made them colder during the long, damp Alabama winters too.

Miz Lucy followed but paused at the edge of the porch, leaning her rounded shoulder against the shaved cypress wood roof support.

Miz Lucretia knocked on the door. They could hear the sound of caught breath inside, and then silence,

followed by a scurrying. Miz Lucretia struck the door facing again.

The door opened. Satyr stood there with his much-washed osnaburg pants wadded against his genitals, and otherwise naked.

Miz Lucretia Borgia felt her eyes burn at the sight of this young and beautiful male. An anguish flared inside her and then washed downward to become liquid fire at her thighs. She could not be wrong about him! He could not be empty. She refused to believe it.

She drew a deep breath and controlled her tone. "We come to talk with you, Satyr," she said. "Yo' an' the gal Dianna."

She saw that Satyr's dark face was flushed and suffused with blood. His eyes were downcast, as if he could not meet her gaze. His shoulders sagged round. He looked like some ancient spartan defeated in battle, alive but with his pride destroyed.

"Yes'm, Miz Lucretia. Come in."

Miz Lucretia walked past the nude boy and Miz Lucy followed. They left Ursula standing on the edge of the porch, her hands locked before her, her face taut.

Discomfited, Satyr moved behind the half-opened door and stepped into his trousers, hopping on one leg. He buttoned the fly and then stood, gazing at the floor, waiting.

Dianna lay naked on the bed. When she recognized Miz Lucy and Miz Lucretia in the shadowed room, something happened in her face; her mouth sagged and her lovely eyes went flat and dead.

Miz Lucretia Borgia studied the girl Dianna. The girl was exquisite, sleek, and supple as an otter. The firm musk melon breasts. The smooth creaminess of unblemished, caramel-colored skin. The almost fragile trim yet still ethnically Negroid features. She had chosen well in selecting Satyr's bed wench. It looked to her as if any man with a drop of gism in him would want Dianna. Miz Lucretia winced, afraid to admit the terrible suspi-

cion festering in her mind. What if Satyr truly were one of those no-good men, as worthless as a capon?

She had first seen such perverted men at Roche's mansion in New Orleans. She had even learned the truth about the Maxwell cousin, cross-eyed Charlie Woodford, at Roche's. She'd never suspected what Charlie was truly like until she'd watched him cavorting naked and drunk with berouged, beribboned, diamond-bedecked, simpering, and limp-wristed males in Roche's red-velvet-draped parlor, with its candles and incense. Sickly, she thought perhaps she might recoup some of her loss in this transaction by selling Satyr off to the hunchbacked Roche.

She stood with her legs braced slightly apart beside the bed, her hands on her hips. She shifted just enough to gaze intently and unyieldingly at Satyr, who stood, cowed in defeat, between her and the doorway.

"How you feelin', Satyr?" she inquired in a honeyed tone. "You all right? How's yo' health?"

Satyr looked wild-eyed, sick with frustration and self-hatred. But he forced himself to smile and nod toward Miz Lucretia and then toward Miz Lucy; he might be impotent, but he was well-mannered. He showed those perfect white teeth. "I fine, Miz Lucretia. I declare, I jes' fine. I reckon I nevah felt better in my whole life."

"He jes' fine," Dianna whispered from the bed.

Miz Lucretia Borgia ignored the girl for the moment. She kept her unblinking black eyes on the youth, his muscled chest glistening with sweat.

"Somethin' wrong," she said. "Miz Lucy here say you cain't do no good with Dianna here. Say you don't no way want her at all."

"He be all right," Dianna whispered. Her voice was edged in terror. "We jes' needs time."

Miz Lucretia turned back and gazed at the girl. She saw the dark eyes brimmed with tears, the underlip trembling, the fists knotted at her side. Dianna was ready to fly to pieces. Miz Lucretia did not give much weight to anything Dianna might say in Satyr's behalf.

She was a young girl, entranced with his beauty. She didn't know yet the mind-boggling delight possible in pleasuring with a real man.

"Something wrong," Miz Lucretia said in a chilled tone.

"It me," Dianna said, voice quavering. "Maybe it's me. But I tryin' . . . I tryin' real hard. . . ."

"Maybe hit takes more than tryin'," Miz Lucretia said. "Maybe what Satyr need is a new bedwench. . . . I think we try that."

Dianna sobbed aloud. "Oh, please, Miz Lucretia Borgia. Don't take him 'way from me. . . . We goin' make it . . . together. . . . Oh, I know we is, an' you jes' gives us a chance."

Miz Lucretia Borgia shrugged and shook her head. "This here is a stud farm," she said coldly. "We raise black chillun fo' sale. You drap a git, it ain't your'n, no way. Hit belong to Master Maxwell. Fo' him to sell, or keep or kill. . . . That up to him. . . . But fust, we got to have men what can knock up the wenches, and dams what draps healthy gits."

"We do it, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am. I swear. Satyr and me. We do it. . . . Jes' give us the chance."

"You done had yo' chance. Come on. Gits up off the bed. Miz Lucy goin' change the sheets and fresh it up some. You come with me, Dianna."

Dianna stood up from the bed but then threw herself into a ball on the floor, weeping against her arms.

Satyr started forward, his eyes brimmed with tears, his voice choked. "It not her fault, Miz Lucretia. I swear. It mine. Don't blame her."

"Ain't blamin' nobody, exactly. Not yet, no way. Jes' goin' try somethin' different. Gone leave a girl named Ursula to live here with you, Satyr. Mayhap you like her better. Mayhap you can bus' her virginity and get her knocked up good."

Dianna sobbed upon the floor. Miz Lucretia spoke in a soft yet firm tone. "Come on, Dianna gal. Git up and slip on yo' shift. You come with me. Things goin' be

fine. . . . I takes you up to the master's big house. . . . You stay there, learn to be a lady's maid."

"I don't want to go," Dianna wept. "Want to stay with Satyr. Please, Miz Lucretia Borgia. Let me stay with Satyr."

Satyr was weeping aloud too now. "Not her fault. Not her fault no way, Miz Lucretia."

Miz Lucretia Borgia crossed the barnyard, going toward the manor house with the weeping Dianna in tow. At the barn the black workers gathered, shouting after them. Word of Satyr's failure had spread through the slave quarters. The men whistled at Dianna, swearing if she were left with them, they would not fail her, not once in a thousand times.

She heard Dianna's muffled sobs. She jerked her turbaned head around and lashed at them. "You sound like a bunch of jackasses."

The men laughed but fell silent. None among them wanted to arouse Miz Lucretia Borgia's enmity; she had one trait very unlike the ordinary black: she could carry a grudge: she did not forget a wrong quickly.

In the kitchen of the old house she turned the crying Dianna over to Myra Belle, the smartest of her house maids. "You help her. You get her bathed up, an' into some proper house dress. If she cries, you jes' let her cry. Feed her big and treat her nice." She patted Dianna on the shoulder. "You feel better, chile, after Myra Belle feeds you nice big dinner."

Miz Lucretia Borgia herself felt none too spry and lighthearted. She kept seeing that beautiful youth behind her eyes; she could not get him out of her thoughts. Mem had not lied; she was afire inside when she thought about him. It had been a long time since she had desired any buck as she wanted this young boy. She worked hard, trying to expunge him from her mind. She did not want to think of Satyr down in that slave cabin with that beautiful Ursula.

The kitchen help operated smoothly without her; the

noon meal was prepared and served to Master Warren in his dining room without a hitch and without her having to reprove anyone. And Mem stayed well out of her way. He could not forgive himself because she had agreed to allow him to mount her, and he, in his anxiety, had failed them both. He spent most of the day draining off the toddy Master Warren left in his toddy glasses, or sneaking straight corn in tumblers when no one was looking. He wavered about the house in the early afternoon, humming to himself, but Miz Lucretia did not bother reproving him.

In the early afternoon she entered the parlor, where Master Warren dozed before an open fire. She exhaled at the blast of heat; the room was like a hothouse. But she knew better than to protest. She knew that if she said anything, the master would swear he was chilled to the marrow. She sweated, wondering how he breathed in there.

She entered the breathless, darkling room and stood some moments watching the master napping, his head slumped upon his chest, breathing through his mouth. She decided not to disturb him. She had wanted to report to him that she had found a new wench with whom to mate the new buck, Satyr. But she decided to say nothing for the time being. Master Warren had no real interest in anything that went on around here anymore. His heart had trudged across the faint trails to the Texies in the wake of his beloved son. She knew she had to help the old man find his way back, but she did not know how she could do it. Things had been so strange at Falconhurst, ever since Master Hammond had gone away. There was a tension in the very atmosphere, a peril that she could find no words for but that she could not escape either.

As she turned, however, in a silence disturbed only by the fat-bellied blue flies bumping into the windowpanes, the screams of the lookouts ripped into the room and wakened Maxwell. The aging man sat up, disoriented, looking around.

"Lucretia! That you? Goddamn it, gal, what's goin' on?"

"Chillun cry company, Masta." Lucretia Borgia came to his chair. "Wants I should help you to the porch so's you can greet 'em?"

Maxwell slapped her hand away. He cursed her. "Don't want nothin' of the kind. If'n it be company, you send them away. Don't want to see nobody."

Miz Lucretia Borgia crossed the room. Maxwell's voice rasped after her. "Damn inquisitive female. Nevah saw yo' beat. Cain't stand nothin' you ain't in the middle of. Hear a noise, got to go runnin' to inspect it."

She walked out of his hearing. He went on sitting there, suddenly chilled by loneliness that washed down over him. He heard the slaves gathering in the yard, the sound of buggy wheels and the leathers and metals of reins and harness. Despite his melancholy, he felt a faint lifting of his heart, the excitement that surrounded arrival of company at Falconhurst.

He went on sitting there even after he heard Mem run out on the front porch, heard the carriage creak to a halt, and the excitement of rising voices. For a moment it occurred to him that it might be Hammond come home, but instantly he knew better. If it were Ham, they would have screamed out that beloved name before this.

He stood up almost instinctively. He stood with his blanket draped about his shoulders, reluctant to stay in here with so much commotion out on the front gallery, and yet without the will to walk out and join them.

He clasped the blanket together at his chest and trudged painfully to the curtained window that looked out on the veranda, the front yard, and the lane beyond. He pinched back the age-crisp curtain and wiped a space through which to watch the arrival of the visitors.

He frowned, shaking his head. A man and a woman got down from a single-seat runaround buggy. The vehicle was mud-spattered, and the people looked tired, as if they had traveled a long way. He had never seen either

one of them before, and yet there was about the woman an air of proprietorship. She smiled pleasedly, as if she liked what she saw, as if she already possessed it in her slender, fragile hand.

VIII

The woman was dressed all in black. Black from picture hat and netted veil to her shoes. But this was not funereal dress worn in mourning. This was a smart and fashionable designer outfit with plunging neckline, trimmed in shiny satin and touched at the hem with sleek black fur, which was very likely mink. Her black hair showed rich curls around her provocative face, hollow-cheeked, with almond-shaped black eyes, curling black lashes, and arched black brows. She was tall, lithe-limbed, slender, and willowy. Her smile, in her moody, brooding face, was abrupt, easy, and devastating. Bold black fire glittered in her ebony eyes like polished gems, hard and cold. Looking at her, Miz Lucretia Borgia felt faint misgivings she could put no words to, a fluttering of unexplained panic deep inside.

She saw that she was not the only one impressed by the stunning appearance of this elegant white woman. Mem stood, gape-mouthed. At the window of the parlor she glimpsed Master Warren's shadow impaled there.

The man who followed the woman up the steps was almost eclipsed in her orbit. He was a tall, thin man, at least six feet, wearing a dark broadcloth suit and top hat, that badge of the southern gentleman-elite. His high-cheekboned face was long, so was his hooked nose. His

mustache was waxed, almost dainty. Though the woman moved with a self-assured imperiousness, the man appeared to follow her almost reluctantly.

Miz Lucretia Borgia admitted they made a striking couple; she supposed that to other white people they were elegant and handsome, but she could think only that something about them troubled her.

But she was not by nature analytical, suspicious, or mistrustful. Like the least of the slaves, shyly gathering at the perimeter of the barnyard to gawk at the strangers, she was excited, pleased at the prospect of company. Outsiders rarely came to Falconhurst. When they did it was always an event, a time to celebrate.

She said, "Welcome, folks. Do come right in."

The woman stiffened slightly, as if offended that the black woman had had the temerity to speak first to her. She looked around, and then back at Miz Lucretia's face, gazing at her along her lovely patrician nose. "Aren't there any white people around here?"

"Oh, yes'm. Masta in the parlor."

"Is this Falconhurst? The Maxwell estate?"

"Yes, ma'am. It sho' is. Welcome to Falconhurst, Mistress and Masta."

"Will you please ask your master to come out?" the woman said. She brushed at a streak of dust desecrating the folds of her black dress. Despite the sweltering heat, she appeared cool.

"Masta, he kinda ill," Miz Lucretia said. "But you folks take out and set. I surely tell him you heah."

As she spoke, the front door was thrust open and Maxwell plodded through it on bare and swollen feet. He was thrusting his misshapen fingers through his wispy red-gray hair. He had been unable to resist the activity on the front porch. Though he had never seen the woman before, something about her intrigued him, troubled him, lured him. He came out on the porch, smiling and bowing, dredging up from the stored places of disused decorum, recalled expressions of breeding, gentility, and gallantry. Something about the elegance of this lovely

young woman brought out long-rusted polish and presence in him.

"Fo'give mah appearance," he began, "but I welcome you folks heah to Falconhurst—"

But the woman did not allow him to finish. That abrupt smile gilded her face and with a childlike cry of delight totally inappropriate to the black, sophisticated dress and imperious manner, she half threw herself upon the master of Falconhurst, engulfing him in her arms. "Oh, it's you, Cousin Warren! Why, I remember you so well. Why, I'd know you anywhere."

She insisted upon kissing him fiercely full upon his mouth. It was the first time Warren had kissed anyone since his wife died, except his own son; and this kiss was not the same thing. He felt a rush of remembered torment wash down through him.

He shook his head. "You 'pears to know me—"

"Why, I'd know you anywhere, Cousin Warren. You haven't changed that much."

She held his hand in her slender, cool palm and he found himself clinging to her fingers. "I declare you got me discomboobulated, ma'am. I don't recall you—or the gentleman"—he tossed the man in the top hat a brief glance—"no way at all. I sorry to be so imperlite, but hit true."

"Why, Cousin Warren, I'm just ashamed of you. Just as ashamed as I can be. Why, I'm Cousin Vesta."

"Don't recall I got no Cousin Vesta. Most of the Maxwells—"

She laughed, a musical sound. "Why, I'm not a Maxwell, Cousin Warren. I am a Hammond. Your own dear wife's cousin Vesta. She and I were double first cousins—"

He nodded, scowling. "I do recall brother Hammonds marrying sister Newsomes. They was some double first cousins, but I don't recall you. And," he added gallantly, "if'n ever I'd seed you, know I'd never forgit."

"Why, Cousin Warren," Vesta said. She stroked his whiskered cheeks with her slender fingers. "Isn't that

just so gallant! But you have seen me before. Why, I was a flower girl at your wedding."

He winced and stared at her helplessly. "That was a long time ago, Cousin Vesta. And you couldn't of been more'n a chile."

"Why, you're just full of compliments. But I wasn't a child. At least, I was certain I wasn't. I was a teenager. I thought everyone who looked at me would believe I was all grown up. . . . I remember crying during the ceremony and just vowing to myself that when I grew up, I wanted to marry a man just like you. I thought Cousin Sophie the luckiest woman in this world to be marryin' a fine and noble young gallant like you."

Warren's face burned pink to the roots of his hair. He grinned sheepishly. "Long time ago. I changed. Got old—"

"Why, you're not old. I know how old you are—"

"How you know that?"

She laughed at him. "Why, that's the easiest thing in the world, Cousin Warren. We Hammonds are great ones for family. You ought to know that. We keep up with ages and births and all those things. All I have to do is add how many years it's been since you and Cousin Sophie were united in that beautiful ceremony. . . . Why, you can't be much over forty."

He exhaled. "I'm almost fifty. Maybe I'm not as old as I feel. But my body is kind givin' out on me. Jes' fell ill lately—and heartbroken."

She kissed his cheek lightly. "Well, I'm sure that whatever is wrong with you can be cured by the tender loving care of a white woman."

Warren exhaled. "Lucretia Borgia here, she pretty good to me. Good as she knows. She a nigger, but sometimes you'd swear she was human."

Cousin Vesta glanced up, her gaze raking across Miz Lucretia's face. The black woman stared at her, unblinkingly, growing more troubled by the moment.

Vesta's honeyed voice dismissed Lucretia as unimportant. "Of course she does all she can, Cousin War-

ren. I'm sure she does. Why, I've known wonderful mammies all my life. But it's not the same. When we are sick, we need our own kind."

Miz Lucretia felt the first flaring of hatred flaming along with the panic deep in her belly.

She stared at the woman, at the man, and back again. Ever since Master Hammond had departed, there had been for Miz Lucretia a strange sense of wrong hanging over the old farm; that wrong was like a miasma suddenly, threatening, even when she could not say why. It was just that something inside warned her, instinct, hackles at the nape of her neck, something unexplained that flitted at the rims of her consciousness. It seemed to her that Cousin Vesta's smile should be warning enough. That smile was too perfect to be true.

She tried to shake the thought from her mind. She was getting nervous and suspicious and edgy; you shouldn't mistrust strangers on sight. Nothing is usually more unreliable than first impressions.

She tried, but she could not relax any more than she could take her penetrating gaze from Vesta's lovely face, even when she realized her gaping annoyed and irritated the guest.

"Oh, Cousin Warren," Vesta said, still clinging possessively to his hand. "I want you to meet my husband. Cousin Warren, this is Bower Ledbetter."

Warren had to remove his hand from Vesta's. He did so reluctantly and extended it toward her husband. His grasp was limp and tentative. Warren dropped his hand and waited for Vesta to touch his again; he felt reassured with his hand in hers; it was almost as if through her touch he came alive; he began to live again.

"Set," he said expansively. "Set. Set yonder, Cousin Bower. And you, Cousin Vesta, you perch here beside me."

"Indeed I will," she said, taking his arm and helping him to a chair. "We've just so much to talk about. Family and all."

"Good to have you here, Cousin Vesta," Warren said. "I swear it is. Ain't had much family visitin'. Cousin Charlie Woodford was here for a spell. You know Cousin Charlie, Vesta?"

"Of course I do. He's Aunt Beatrix's youngest boy. I used to visit often at the lovely old home of Colonel Butler Woodford when Blanche was a girl. Do you visit them often?"

Warren winced and shook his head. He had not visited at the Woodford place in twenty years; he had not seen Beatrix since that unfortunate day that Blanche had given birth to a black child and Beatrix had smashed the infant's head against the wall before anyone else had seen it, setting off the tragic chain of events that had led to Ham's departure for the Texies. He felt his eyes brim with helpless tears and he shook them away.

"No," he said. "Ain't seen none of them folks for a spell. You mus' be from the Anglebranch Plantation wing of the Hammonds?"

"Yes. Uncle Theophilus Hammond of Anglebranch, yo' Miss Sophie's own daddy, was the double-first cousin of my mother. Our place was not as fine as Anglebranch, but it was most respectable."

"Why, I'm sho' it was," Warren said, the gallantry bubbling and boiling out of him. "Wasn't many plantations as fine as Mr. Theophilus Hammond's ole Anglebranch, I can tell. One of the showplaces."

"Truly, a showplace," she said. She looked around. "You built a—a sturdy mansion here."

"Shelter. Jes' shelter." Warren smiled and spoke in that deprecating way southerners must use to acknowledge their own assets even if they are as magnificent as Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. "Been here a long time, though. Own family burial plot out yonder, 'mongst those trees, near that worm fence there. Grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles, an' some Hammonds buried out there in the Maxwell burial ground. Why, my own granddaddy built a log house in this clearing right here. That was before the war against Britain, it was. Then

my pappy had his slaves tear down the cabin and build this nine-room clapboard. Pretty fancy in them days for these parts. Just a plain and common house today. . . . You see them piles of stones yonder? They for the new house my son Hammond and I plan to build sometime. . . . Meant to build it for my dear Miss Sophie, but she passed away 'fore I could git 'round to it, an' then it jes' didn't seem to matter no more." With the tip of his index finger he brushed at a tear of self-pity welling in his eye. "Maybe when Hammond git married again and settles down, he'll want a fine fieldstone showplace, an' we able to build it fo' him."

"Where is Cousin Hammond?" Vesta had been holding Warren's gaze fixed with her strangely black and piercing eyes. She glanced away and then looked back quickly, as if she were communicating with the older man in a way that had nothing to do with words. Watching her, Miz Lucretia wondered what kind of husband her Bower Ledbetter was that he did not notice the way his wife caressed Warren Maxwell with her strange eyes, secretive, secret, and suggestive. She could not believe he was so insensitive he did not see, or so stupid he did not care. Yet he sat placidly, hat and cane on his lap, hands at his side. "I just been looking forward to visiting my dear cousin Hammond. He must be grown-up now."

Warren nodded. His eyes filled with tears. "I wish Ham was heah, Vesta, so's he could see you and Cousin Bower. Ham's growed, yes. Full growth. A fine man. He a fine man. All the Hammonds can be proud of Hammond. He named for them, and he a man to make them proud."

"I'm sure he is. Where is he?"

Warren winced. "Ham's not heah just now, Miss Vesta. He goin' be sick that he missed you. Hammond a great one fo' family. He went down to Colonel Butler Woodford's estate to visit. He met Cousin Blanche down there, and they got married. Had a little daughter they did. Name of Sophie. She runnin' 'round the place some-

where. . . . She got a disfigurement what run in the Hammond family—you fo'give me—an' no offense intended."

"None taken, dear Cousin Warren. You mean little Sophie is cross-eyed. It does run in some parts of the Hammond family. Dear Cousin Charlie is most cross-eyed."

"Well, wish they was somethin' I could do fo' little Sophie. Hate for her to grow up when the boys start callin' an' her afflicted with cross-eyes. Kindly ruins a girl's self-confidence. . . . Hate to see the chile unhappy. . . . She done had unhappiness enough, losin' her mother. . . . Cousin Blanche, she died in childbirth—her second chile, a little boy—you know."

"Yes. I heard that. I'm sorry. I always loved Blanche."

"She a fine girl. A fine girl. I most partial to her myself."

"Do you expect Cousin Hammond to be away a few days?" Vesta asked.

Warren burst into sudden tears. "Oh, Gawd. I ashamed. A growed man carryin' on and cryin' like a old woman. Fo'give me, Cousin Vesta, an' you, Cousin Bower . . . I jus' ain't myself . . . been sick at heart ever since Hammond up and left for the Texies."

"The Texies?"

Warren mopped at his eyes with his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly, nodding. "Yes'm. The Texies. He been gone 'bout six months now. But I cain't no way adjust myself that he gone. I keep lookin' up, you know? 'Spectin' to see him a-stridin' toward me on his game leg, smilin' and puttin' out his arms. Ham a most lovin' son . . . or was, till he got stricken with troubles. Then he just up and went away to the Texies."

"Maybe he'll come back soon," Vesta said soothingly. She turned and caressed Warren's arm with her tapered fingers. With her other hand she turned back her veil and an errant breeze caught it playfully, flicking it about her picture hat. As though the breeze released her spirit, she raised her head and breathed deeply, looking

about the old plantation. Fascinated, Miz Lucretia watched the cameo perfection of her profile against the fragile black fabric, which made her face appear paler and whiter than ever on the shadowed porch. She had never seen such cold, self-possessed beauty before, except it kept nagging at her that somewhere she had seen this very face. . . .

She tried but could not shake the thought from her mind.

"Don't know if'n Ham will ever come back," Warren said. "But I pray he will. That all I live for anymore, Miss Vesta."

"You mustn't do that. You must live for yourself, Cousin Warren."

"Myself?" Warren looked around bleakly. "What I got to live for?"

"You've got this lovely old home, this great estate, your whole life ahead of you."

"This heah estate, I build and plan and keep only for Ham. But he gone now. I got nobody."

"He's young. Maybe he just needs to find himself."

"I tell myself that, Miss Vesta." He clutched her hand. "I pray that is true. That Ham gone away to the Texies to spread a few wild oats, and get a rest. He's worked hard here. Worked all his life, he has. I reckon I piled too much responsibility on his shoulders when he too young to handle it. It my fault—"

"I'm sure you did what you thought was best."

"I did. Oh, I did. This heah plantation was my whole an' entire life. An' Ham was my whole life. I wanted them together. Like one. One was for the other. In my mind, it had to be that way. . . . But I see he was too young. Had to tote this whole plantation on his shoulders whilst he was still a young boy that ain't even had time for sowin' his oats. He nevah got into the kind of devilment all boys is got to go through if'n they goin' to be strong men.

"Why, po' Ham. He never even got no schoolin' to speak of. His mamma learned him to read and tote up

figures a little. I tried to help him after she died. Nearest school in Benson, and it not much. A waste of time sendin' the boy so far mornin' an' night. His maw could read and tote figures real good. Better'n I can. . . . Sent Ham over to the institute at Jackson for a term three, four years ago. But he didn't git along, not bein' used to strict rules, and other boys that joshed him on account of his game leg."

"Cousin Ham has a game leg?" Vesta prompted.

Warren's pale eyes filled with tears. "Mighty noticeable. Reckon it be the first thing a stranger notices 'bout Ham, seein' him for the first time, way he walk with that stiff leg o' his'n. He got that game leg from a gelded pony when he was a chile of six years old. That spotted pony seemed gentle when I traded for it, but you cain't never trust a gelding, horse or nigger. Three things in this heah world I cain't abide is a gelded-acting white man, a gelded animal, or the smell of nigger musk too close in a closed room. Cain't abide them three things. 'Specially no gelding. They villainous and double-hearted. The varmint throwed the boy off the third day he had him, bucked him right off without'n no reason at all. I didn't think the chile was hurt none. I toted him into the house, into that sofa in the parlor. He was a-cryin' and we undressed him as gentle as we could. I rubbed him down with whiskey. Lucretia Borgia here, she a-suckin' her twin boys at the time—an' I give the babies as a present and a bribe to Ham to let her rub it with whiskey every day. He let her, an' he howl, till Doc Redfield say he got a break in the knee. That knee stiffen up, an' hit nevah healed right. He cain't scarcely bend it at all. Needs help takin' off his boots at night—an' he out there somewhere 'mongst strangers."

"Cousin Ham will be all right," Vesta said in a gentle tone. "I'm sure he will."

"I afraid he git out in that wild world, and he change and won't nevah come back to Falconhurst."

She leaned over in her chair and kissed his cheek

softly. "Then, if that's the way it is, you just have to reconcile yourself."

He moaned aloud. "Cain't nevah do that."

"Won't be easy, dear Cousin Warren. But you might have to do it. A boy like Cousin Hammond. He has to find himself. To decide what he wants in his own life. He can't go on living for other people, not even a loving and doting father like you."

"I cain't reconcile to that, Cousin Vesta. God help me, I cain't."

"Sometimes a parent just has to reconcile himself, Cousin Warren. A boy grows into manhood, gets itchy feet, the calling of strange places."

"I understand that. The very wind itself a-calls him."

"That's right, Cousin Hammond. You just have got to accept that Cousin Hammond is gone—and likely is not coming back."

Warren burst into tears. "My Gawd, Cousin Vesta. My Gawd almighty, don't say that."

"I'm just trying to help you. I want to help you. I'm here to help you. Both Bower and I want to do everything we can to help you. But first, we've got to help you start to live again—to want to live—"

"If'n I thought for one full minute that Ham wasn't nevah comin' home from them Texies, Cousin Vesta, that I'd not see my boy alive again, I jus' couldn't go on sufferin' in God's evil world. I jus' couldn't do it."

She pressed his hand in both of hers comfortingly. "Nobody said he wasn't coming back."

"Not at all." Cousin Bower Ledbetter spoke for the first time. "I am sure from what I've heard you say, Cousin Warren, that Cousin Hammond will come back. That's not what Vesta is saying at all. She's just tryin' to make you see it just ain't healthy to count too much on it. That's all."

IX

Somewhere in her past Miz Lucretia Borgia had heard the fable about the camel who forced its nose inside its owner's tent and proceeded to oust the man. The myth had not much impressed her until the arrival at Falconhurst of the fabulous Cousin Vesta Hammond and her shadowy, silent husband. Ever since Vesta Hammond had slithered—and this was Miz Lucretia's own mental image—onto the estate, and in every minute of each day which followed, she watched the woman assume command of the house, its master, the plantation itself, and all its chattel.

It began with Master Warren's insistence that Vesta and Bower should stay for the noon meal. He even walked into the house and into the dining room with Cousin Vesta on his arm. As soon as he sat down at the head of the table he complained, loudly and relentlessly. "This here meal is a crime an' a disgrace. You, Lucretia Borgia, what kinda kitchen you run when we got company for dinner?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia, standing behind his chair, gazed at the heavily laden dining table as he ordered. A sumptuous repast was spread out there, if she had dared to say so. But she did not dare to speak when Master Warren was in this strange new mood. He looked as if

he waited for her to protest; a nigger whipping might be just the ticket to amuse his relatives during the long hot afternoon.

The sweet potatoes were candied, dripping with honey and allowed to toast around the edges just enough to give them a gemlike glaze. The hens had been baked golden, cooked until the succulent meat separated from the bone, ready to fall off. There were vegetables from the Falconhurst garden, gathered fresh this morning. The bread was so freshly baked its aroma lingered in the room. Waiting to be served as dessert was rice custard, peach pies, or strawberries with rich full cream.

"'You jes' gettin' slovenly, Lucretia,'" Maxwell persisted. "Slovenly. Too busy to look after the matters that concern you. I hope these dear folks will stay for supper."

"'Why, of course we'll stay for supper, Cousin Warren,'" Vesta said. She pressed his hand on the top of the table. "Why, we'll stay as long as you want us."

"'I reckon a man, livin' alone like I do, lets things slide. Lets the house niggers git slovenly,'" Maxwell said. "Don't notice how triflin' things has got until you gits company—and you is served a meal that is shameful. Jes' shameful."

"'Why, we enjoy it, Cousin Warren,'" Vesta assured him.

"'I know you sweet and kindly. You'd say that. An' force the food down to keep from embarrassin' me . . . but I can tell you, there will be a meal fittin' for white people served here tonight . . . or they going to be big trouble.'"

"'The dinner is really quite good, Cousin Warren,'" Vesta said. "But one can see how niggers will take advantage of a man when he's alone—and not feeling well. Maybe Bower and I can help you straighten things out.'"

Maxwell stared at the dark-haired woman, nodding. "I'd be eternal grateful, Cousin Vesta. That's what I'd be. Eternal grateful."

After the meal ended, food that the Ledbetter cousins and Master Warren devoured down to the bones so there would be no scraps for the dogs that loitered around the kitchen porch, they retired to the living room. But Master Warren yelled for Lucretia. "You folks excuse me, Cousin Vesta. I go upstairs and put on some fresh clothin'. . . . Why, maybe you and Cousin Bower like to freshen up. . . . You stayin' the night, you have the servants bring yo' bags in, and we put you in an upstairs guest room."

With Mem overseeing the younger house boys, four large carpetbags were transported upstairs from the tonneau of the runabout. Maxwell stood at the head of the stairway, directing traffic. "You folks can have the guest room. Heah, 'cross the hall from me," he said.

"That's sweet of you, dear Cousin Warren," Vesta said. "But if it doesn't put you out, I wonder if I might have a bedroom of my own—apart from Bower." She laughed lightly and ran the tips of her fingers along Warren's arm. "Bower does snore slightly."

"No bother in this world. Why, we'll put you in yore Cousin Sophie's bedroom. It's yonder. Next to mine. Make you feel more at home, being in the room, where your own cousin had her things. Hit just about as it was when she passed away. We ain't changed much. Have the girls freshen it up for you."

"Please don't put yourself to any trouble," Vesta protested.

"No trouble at all. Like you can see, we overrun with niggers here at Falconhurst. Got a yard full of 'em, being raised to sell. Got the house full too. Anything in this world you want, you just tell Lucretia Borgia here. She have a couple black girls to help you dress an' all. I know Miss Sophie, she used to have at least two black girls waitin' on her. They triflin'. But you speak sharp, you make 'em jump, jus' like they your own."

"Why, Cousin Warren, you jus' goin' to spoil li'l ole

me to death," Vesta said, turning the fullness of her smile upon him.

He reddened slightly. "What I want to do whilst you a guest in this house. Tha's what pretty young cousins is for—to be sp'iled. Always did say that."

"Aren't you just gallant?" Vesta cried. "I declare, you have not changed one bit since you and Cousin Sophie was married."

Miz Lucretia Borgia watched them helplessly, thinking, Gawd help me, I might jus' throw up, right here in the hall.

In his bedroom Maxwell insisted upon a hot bath. Mem ordered the house boys to prepare the brass tub, which hadn't been used since Master Hammond had departed for Texas. Maxwell let himself down in the steaming water and yelled for Lucretia. "You wash me up. Cain't depend on Mem. That lazy bastid ain't wuth killin'."

Lucretia Borgia pushed her short sleeves above her biceps, got on her knees beside the ornamented tub, and scrubbed Master Warren with such vigor that he cursed, yelling and protesting. She left his skin red and glowing, but clean. When he got out of the tub, he sagged in a rocking chair, panting from fatigue. "Now, you lather me up and give me a good clean shave."

She spread a towel over him, shaved him neatly, and trimmed his hair across the neck and about the ears. She admitted he looked younger. He ordered her to find a clean silk shirt and fresh white duck pants. He tried to wear shoes, but they were too painful. At last, he was able to endure a pair of light sandals.

He found a cane, and, supporting himself upon it, with Lucretia Borgia gently bolstering an elbow, he navigated the stairs on tender feet, going in triumph out to the front gallery, where his guests sat, fanning themselves in the shade.

"Why, don't you look nice," Vesta said when Warren staggered through the doorway. She jumped up from her

chair and came to meet him. She elbowed Lucretia aside and walked with Maxwell to his chair. He thanked her warmly and sank into it, taking some moments fully to catch his breath.

Warren began to entertain them with stories about the Hammonds, the Maxwells, and others of the clan who had sunk their roots in this Alabama soil before 1776. He seemed unable to stop talking, as if he had been starved all these weeks and months and years for an appreciative audience.

Lucretia stood behind his chair, her hands folded under her apron. She admitted that Cousin Vesta was an appreciative audience. She appeared to hang on to each word, though Cousin Bower, who had eaten three high-piled plates of chicken, vegetables, and sweet potatoes at dinner, dozed quietly.

Vesta laughed in all the right places and never yawned once. "Why, I'm just fascinated, Cousin Warren. You have had such an exciting life. I imagine few men your age have had the adventures you have, or have accumulated half as much as you have."

He smiled humbly and self-deprecatingly. "Reckon I jus' seen the way the wind was a-blowin'. Jes' got in the right business at the right time."

"You have to be smart and clever to do that," Vesta said.

"I seen that they was comin' a time when the South wasn't goin' to have no young, strappin' darkies to plant and pick cotton and tobacco and do all the other things they used for on all the big farms from Maryland south. The British ended tradin' in blacks on the high seas way back in 1805. And Thomas Jefferson said the importin' of blacks from outside the country had to be stopped. The warnin' was there, clear for anybody to read. Reckon nobody truly believed that day would really come when you couldn't go to the ports at Savannah, Mobile, Charleston, New Orleans, or Richmond and buy all the bozals and bucks you needed to carry on the agriculture of this whole section. I saw that trade was goin' to dry

up to a trickle. I say a trickle, because ain't no sense tryin' to deceive a lovely young girl like you. Slaves still bein' pirated into the country. Ships runnin' the blockades, but they jes' a trickle. Niggers has to be raised right here in the South, or they ain't goin' to be any of the animals to do the labor."

"And you supply that need," Vesta whispered in an awed voice.

He smiled at her. "Supply jus' a part of it. Started out to supply field hands and bozals. But I found anybody could do that. Anybody that could mate up a black stud and a dam, they'd get a drape of some kind. But I seen where the money was. It was in quality niggers. Fancy and prime. Bloodlines. Like growin' the best Thoroughbred horses, an' improvin' the strain of cattle. Before Hammond left he was mighty interested in improvin' the bloodlines. Got so folks got to waitin' for an auction in New Orleans or Natchez where Falconhurst animals is offered for sale. They pay three, even four times for a Falconhurst fancy what they would pay for an ordinary bozal or field hand." He laughed. "They do say no Falconhurst nigger is ever worked in the fields no more. Folks what buy them are pridey about it. Use 'em to stand at stud, and work light around the house and to show off to company."

"Why, that's just fascinating," Vesta said. "But doesn't it take a long time to raise a black until it is ready for market?"

Maxwell nodded emphatically. "It does indeed, Missy. Hit requires a perilous long time. It fourteen to eighteen years between when a git is drapped and it's healthed-up, sleeked, and ready for the market. Ain't no quick cash crop like cotton, tobacco, or indigo. Only good thing, they is no birthin' season, like say for lambs. Niggers is jes' natural randy critters; they hop something ever' chance they git, and they few failures. We got young gals knocked up 'round heah all the time, and colts bein' drapped." He laughed. "Usually 'bout four A.M. in the mawnin' when you is plumb dead tired. But we kindly

space out the animals that we raise from birth. We picks up likely-lookin' weanlings and yearlings. We git a striplin' say he 'round ten to fourteen. He might be sickly-lookin', puny, when we gits him. But we feeds him plenty of clabber and pone and long sweetenin'. We have a vet what looks close after our animals. You jus' be shocked and surprised how we can bring 'em out in jus' a few years. Don't hardly bear no resemblance to the puny little sapling we bought from some coffle or other. We now got it arranged—with the help of the good Lord—that every year we got a hundred or so adolescents, pubescents, and young gals thirteen to twenty salable ready or pregnant. A pregnant young dam, from thirteen up, bring highest prices. Buyers feel they gittin' more for they money when they buy a young lass and she got one a-bakin' in the oven for them."

"You make it sound so exciting, Cousin Warren," Vesta said.

"It jus' so good to have someone like you heah . . . an' Cousin Bower . . . folks that are part of the family. . . . Things been so evil. . . . Done kindly lost interest in livin' itself, you know."

Vesta laughed and squeezed his hand. "We can't have that, can we?"

"You most kind, and I so glad you here."

All this time Miz Lucretia Borgia had watched Cousin Vesta, fascinated. The woman became aware of her unblinking staring, and she stirred uncomfortably, casting savage looks toward the Negress when Cousin Warren was too involved to notice. At last, troubled, Miz Lucretia could refrain no longer. "Miss Cousin Vesta," she said in a lull in the dialogue between the lovely woman and the master of the plantation, "pardon me, ma'am, but I jes' do declare that I's seen you somewhere before."

Vesta jerked her head up, catching her breath sharply. She did not reply directly to the slave woman; instead, she spoke in a voice deadly with chill. "Since when do

colored women dare speak to white ladies when they haven't been properly spoken to in the first place?"

Maxwell sat forward in his chair, quivering with sudden rage. "Lucretia Borgia, you hankerin' for a tetch of the whip? How dare you to insult my guest this a-way? What in the world you thinkin' about, anyway?"

Vesta spoke gently to her host, in a conciliatory tone. "It's all right, Cousin Warren. I realize when niggers run free—without a strong white woman to guide and teach them, they tend to get a little out of hand. . . . I would not have spoken so sharply, but in polite society, a white lady is *never* approached by a nigger until after that nigger has been given permission to speak."

Warren spread his hands, his face flushed. "I know an' understand that, Cousin Vesta. And you do have my apology. You can see how bad I need my boy heah—if Hammond heah right now, that pushy Lucretia be hanging by her thumbs waitin' for the whip."

"That does seem drastic," Vesta said. "But I do see the need for teaching niggers to know their place, even on a farm that is out of the way. They must not be allowed to get uppity."

"One thing I cain't abide," Warren said, "is an uppity nigger. Won't have one 'round me. Reckon I has let Lucretia get too free and easy."

"It's just that I'm not accustomed to such behavior," Vesta said. "If I were here very long, I would put a stop to it."

Lucretia Borgia seemed barely to have heard them. She shook her head, speaking aloud but half to herself. "I know I 's seen you before. I'm sho' I has, Missy."

"That's enough, woman!" Warren raged.

"Let me settle this, Cousin Warren," Vesta said. "This time. It is quite impossible, young woman, that you have seen me before."

"Of course you ain't," Maxwell said. "Jus' another one of yo' fool Nigra ideas."

"You ain't nevah been 'round heah before?" Lucretia persisted.

"That's enough." Vesta's voice was like a lash. "Of course I have never been in this part of Alabama before. I have not seen your master since his wedding—at the home of his bride's father."

"Yes'm." Lucretia Borgia nodded, contrite, bobbing her turbaned head in a gesture of servility. Cousin Vesta sighed with a sense of relief that an awkward moment had passed—a moment that could not be permitted to occur again. But Lucretia Borgia could not resist one last word, even when she knew she was flirting with the whip. "Still, I strong 'bout faces, hardly evah fo'gits a face."

Vesta sucked in a deep, wounded breath that revealed how affronted she was, but she stared along her nose and spoke in her sweetest tone, though without a trace of that flashing smile. "I thought all we white folks looked alike to you people."

Miz Lucretia gave the guest her most servile smile. "No, ma'am. Not you. You don't look like nobody else I ever seed. Tha's why I sho' an' certain I couldn't fo'git."

"That's enough, goddamn it, Lucretia." Warren Maxwell looked as if he would spring from his chair under the power of his rage and the impetus of his need to impress his lovely guest. "You speak one mo' word to this heah lovely white lady an' you ain't spoke to fust an' I has Pole take a whip to you on the spot."

Vesta stroked his hand soothingly. "That won't be necessary, Cousin Warren. I'm sure before Bower and I leave I can impart some modicum of respect and humility into this woman."

"Gawd knows I hope so," Cousin Warren said. "You kin jes' stay till you do. Stay long as you like."

Cousin Bower laughed. "Well, I do have my business interests, Cousin Warren. But as anyone can see, you can use plenty of help, jus' teachin' these uppity Nigras their place. And I don't know anybody who has a better way with servants than Vesta. She's kind, but firm."

"Tha's what you got to be," Warren agreed. "Kind. But firm."

"It's second nature with me," Vesta said in a gentle tone. "It's part of my training. We had only the most polite and well-behaved servants in my home, I can promise you."

X

By the time Miz Lucretia Borgia returned to her kitchen, she was talking to herself.

Heat and silences of midafternoon pressed in upon her. She could hear the increased volume of ongoing dialogues between Cousin Vesta and Master Warren on the front veranda. More distantly, the familiar sounds of the slaves at their chores, suddenly too removed to give her that old sense of security that had always sustained her before. She felt as though the flooring and ground itself below her were insubstantial and treacherous.

She was aware that she was mumbling aloud, but she did not give a damn. Sometimes things around this place got her to talking to herself. Sometimes she felt she was the only sane being on the plantation. There simply was nobody else for her to talk to. "Damn that white woman's fishy-white flesh," she muttered. "She the kinda woman give white people a bad name."

Using her apron, she swiped furiously at the dining room table as she passed. There was no dust, but she needed to be doing something. "Damn her. Don't care what that white woman say. I's seed her before. . . ." She entered the kitchen, thankful to find her domain empty of workers in the afternoon. She needed to be

alone. "Know I is. I've seed that Cousin Vesta. I swear I is."

"What you say?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia cried out, shocked. Her eyes went round and she raised her arms as if to protect herself from an unseen attacker. Mem stepped out of the liquor closet.

Her startled reaction disturbed and frightened Mem and he stood, his hands loose at his sides, his mouth gaping. As always, Miz Lucretia recovered first. She sucked in a deep breath and lashed out at him. "What you doin' in that liquor closet, nigga?"

"Jes' checkin'," he said. "Way Masta drinkin' lately. . ."

But Miz Lucretia was too distracted and preoccupied to care. She just swung her arm at him and sagged into the cane-bottomed kitchen chair at the head of the scrubbed bare table.

"What frettin' you?" Mem said.

"Nothin', nigga. Nothin' you'd know anythin' 'bout."

"Want me to git you little glass of corn squeezin's?"

"No. I don't run git myself a drink every time things go wrong."

He grinned crookedly. "Sho' makes wrong a lot easier to bear."

"Oh, I'm sure it does. But that's why I different from you. I lookin' for answers. . . . You jes' lookin' fo' another reason to poach Masta's whiskey."

"Gawd knows he's got plenty of it . . . an' he mostly the reason I drinkin' in the fust place."

She stared at him a moment and then laughed helplessly. She shook her head. "You got the feelin' you ever seed that Miss Vesta befo'?"

"No. Never has. Never has wanted to. Skinny white women 'bout the ugliest things I ever is see."

"I's seed her before."

"Couldn't have. She say she ain't evah been 'round here before."

"Well, either that white woman a liar or somethin'

wrong. I know I has seed her. She the kind of white woman I wouldn't nevah forgit."

He grinned at her. "Was you at Masta Warren's wedding to Miss Sophie?"

Her voice rasped at him. "You know I wasn't. . . . You know I was at Macklin's farm till Masta bought me and brung me heah."

"Ain't evah seed her, ain't evah seed anybody exactly like her," Mem said.

Miz Lucretia Borgia shook her head. Her voice was chilled, cold, and troubled. "That woman strange. Purentee strange."

A sudden sense of wrong compelled Miz Lucretia to jerk her head around toward the dining room door. She stared, gape-mouthed.

Miss Vesta Hammond stood just inside the doorway. It was as if she had materialized there when Miz Lucretia Borgia spoke her name.

The glitter in her eyes was like a warning signal flashed at Lucretia Borgia. But Vesta did not even speak to her. Her voice was controlled, light, almost pleasant, with only the faintest underbedding of steel in it. She said, "Memnon, your master wants a fresh toddy. At once."

Mouth gaping, Mem stood beside the table, nodding his head.

Like an avenging angel, Big Mama Lucy awaited her when Miz Lucretia came down the rear stairwell in the false dawn next morning. Lucy poised in the chair at the head of the kitchen table. Miz Lucretia smelled the coffee cooking and recognized the signs. This was the first time in years that Big Lucy had ever dared come into her kitchen and prepare the coffee, as she always had in the distant past. "Put in some salt," Lucy said. "Give it some flavor."

Miz Lucretia exhaled and said nothing. Lucy had found fresh breakfast rolls and helped herself.

Miz Lucretia forced herself to smile. None of this was important in itself. There was no law that prevented Big

Lucy from making coffee—even with salt in it—or from helping herself to the baked buns. God knew there were dozens of them—Lucretia liked to bribe and reward the children with them during the day; loved to see those grinning little faces turned up like flowers when they thanked her. But added all together, it was another sign of the deepening wrong that spread like an infection over the plantation.

“Mornin’, Big Lucy,” Miz Lucretia said. “How you? How’s Big Pearl an’ them strappin’ boys of your’n?”

Big Lucy munched contentedly upon her cinnamon bun, washing it down with a long gulp of black coffee before she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and grinned broadly. “They all fine. It’s you. Got some mo’ bad news fo’ you, I sorry to say.”

Miz Lucretia’s heart sank. Next to Cousin Vesta Hammond, she could not think of a bearer of tidings she welcomed less than Big Lucy. She recognized that Vesta Hammond was a threat to the tranquility and security of the farm; she knew this instinctively, without even being able to say how she knew, and why the panic fluttered in her empty belly when that white woman approached her soundlessly in the hallways, always coming upon her unexpectedly, always staring at her like a hangman with his noose waiting.

Big Lucy foreshadowed another kind of failure, maybe one as fatal in the long run. Miz Lucretia had purchased the new black stud, and she could see in the smirk contorting Big Lucy’s face that Satyr had failed a second time in his mission, his only reason for existence on this farm. Big Lucy saw this as the beginning of the end for Miz Lucretia, for the collapse of her long and unjustified reign. Big Lucy was ready to step back into the kitchen.

“That boy Satyr,” Big Lucy said. “He ain’t done that Ursula gal no more good than he did for poor li’l ole Dianna. I hates to say it, Miz Lucretia, but looks like you got yo’self a capon down yonder. A pretty face. A

pretty body. Mighty pretty. But weaker'n puddle water. I hates to say it."

"I know how much you hates to say it."

Big Lucy glanced up over the brim of her coffee mug and smiled blandly.

Miz Lucretia went listlessly about her duties, preparing a breakfast menu that would please the master and satisfy his imperious relatives. She had sent Lucy away, telling her only to get that Ursula girl out of there; she would determine what to do about Satyr when she could. "Do the masta know that boy is shootin' whey water?" Lucy inquired, eyes narrowing.

Lucretia smiled. "You won't need to inform him, Miz Lucy. I do it."

"Somebody sho' ought to tell him."

The room was crowded with cooks and helpers. She went about overseeing their duties, barely aware of them, hardly alert to what went on around her. When she heard Mem helping the master painfully and slowly down the stairway and into his chair before the parlor fire, she prepared a hot toddy, tripled with corn and laced with long sweetening. Since Miss Vesta Hammond and her husband were late risers, the early morning was Miz Lucretia's only opportunity to discuss farm matters with the lord of the estate.

She entered the living room to find Maxwell muttering in suppressed violence at Memnon, threatening the butler with thirty lashes when Master Ham returned. But Master Warren was clad in fresh clothing, and Mem had shaved him and brushed his dry, unruly hair this morning. "My, you do look nice," Miz Lucretia said, giving Maxwell his toddy.

Maxwell took the glass in both hands. He held it to his mouth in warped fingers and drank greedily before he bothered to answer her at all. When he did speak, his voice was cold, hard with threat. "Miz Vesta say you imperlite, Lucretia. That white lady a beloved relative of mine. I won't have you behavin' uppity toward her."

"I try, Masta. I try my best to please her. . . . It jes' that I got so much on my mind."

Warren laughed in cold frustration. "Yes, Mem tells me that your latest stud purchase cain't do nothin' with the dams."

Miz Lucretia's head jerked up and she cursed Mem silently over Maxwell's head. Mem only grinned blandly. As Lucy looked forward to that great day when she would displace Lucretia Borgia in the manor house kitchen, Mem dreamed ahead to the time when the young stud Satyr would be sold down the river. Miz Lucretia exhaled. Everybody wanted something.

"He havin' a bit of trouble," Miz Lucretia admitted. "He jes' a boy."

"Boys be more randy than full-grown men, an' able to control it less. They be jumping ducks and jennys and guineas hens, you don't watch 'em."

Something flashed at the perimeter of Miz Lucretia's mind, a hasty thought too swift to catch, like a humming bird at a gardenia's throat. She spoke in a soothing tone that was totally false. "He be all right."

Maxwell took another pull on the toddy. "He better be. I tell you this, Lucretia Borgia. I find out that animal's a gelding, I'll kill him. . . . I won't hesitate. . . . Won't have no perverted animals among my herd. You hear me? I'll have Pole knock him in the haid."

The slave quarters lay stunned and silent in the mid-morning heat. But plodding along the hard-packed lane between the cabins, Lucretia knew the huts crackled with tension. Silently, secretly grinning, the other slaves watched her approach the shack where Satyr had been housed first with Dianna and then with Ursula. Satyr's helplessness with females was the worst-kept secret on the farm. The women smiled and winked about it. In the barns and fields and corrals the men guffawed and slapped one another on the shoulder. Pole said it for all of them. "Gawd knows I wish they let me jes' try to fail with Ursula and Dianna. Even failin', I die happy."

Holding her breath, she went up on the front stoop and rapped on the door facing. The door was opened slowly and Satyr stood there, incredibly handsome, muscled, sheepish, and miserable. He bowed to her and spoke her name, but he could not look her in the face.

"May I come in, Satyr?"

He nodded and stepped away from the door. He wore only that pair of much-washed osnaburg pants, which clung to his thighs like a second layer of flesh. How could so beautiful a man be so empty? She supposed women had been wondering this since the first female trailed a gorgeous male to a frustrating lair. But whether a male preferred females or other men was a matter of private preference anywhere else; on Falconhurst plantation it could well be a matter of life and death, as Satyr was going to learn.

"How you comin' on?" she asked him. She closed the door and stood looking about the sparsely furnished room.

"They taken Miz Ursula away," he said.

"I know they did. I told them to."

"She nice. They both nice. They lovely gals. Whatever is wrong, it ain't their fault."

"Tha's why I heah, Satyr." She peered at the youth in the shadowed room. He was beautifully built, upstanding, well-proportioned, with good, almost pretty features. She was even thinking, in surrender, that his shortcomings would not cheapen him at auction. There were men—like Roche, whom she knew from experience—who paid premium prices for pretty young dandies like Satyr. She shivered, dreading that truth, even now. She kept seeing her twin sons, Alph and Omega, used in shocking orgies at that Charles Street mansion. "Masta Warren, he mighty unhappy 'bout the way you cain't do no good."

His eyes brimmed with tears. "You think I ain't sick to my heart, Miz Lucretia? You think I don't want to be like other men? You think I don't want to daddy me my own li'l ole son?"

"Don't git no wrong ideas 'bout that neither, Satyr. That ain't why you here, neither. Nothin' is yours. Do you knock up one of these gals, or a dozen of them, them gits ain't no way your'n. They belongs body and soul to the white masta. They belongs to the masta. An' so do you. Your body belong to him. But if'n that body ain't no good, then you ain't no good to him. An' he gits rid of you. The white man is our masta, Satyr—"

"Gawd knows, I's learned that by now."

"Maybe you think you has. But maybe it ain't even been like it is here at Falconhurst. Here, they not only buys and sells us. They owns our bodies, and they can do with 'em what they want. And when they ain't pleased with them, they can git rid of 'em, like they would a rat in the barn." She sighed and nodded. "You got to see that. You like the cattle and the horses to the white folks 'round here. They treat you good, long as you produce for 'em. An' you don't, they got no use for you."

"I try, Miz Lucretia. . . . I want to do what the white masta say . . . an' more'n that, I wants to please you. . . . You been kindly . . . an' that Miz Ursula, she sweet and good. An' Miss Dianna, I think I love her deep, Miz Lucretia. Real deep. I never felt that way 'bout no gal before, and I think she love me too."

"Oh, my Gawd." Miz Lucretia spread her hands. "There you go, doin' it all wrong. You ain't to fall in love with Dianna—or nobody. Niggers ain't got no earthly business a-fallin' in love. That's for white people. It jus' a hurt for folks like us. Dianna is a nigger and so is you. You both got your work to do—an' it don't leave no time or no place for fallin' in love." She shook her head. "You bes' make up your mind to that. For your own good. You're a nigger, no matter what you tells yo'self, and you got no rights except what the white masta say is right. . . . Masta, he don't care how many these heah gals you pleasure. You a good bloodline, and you improve the strain. You can have all the gals and they pretties that you want. . . . But when you ain't no good

at all with 'em, that makes somethin' else out of you—somethin' that the white masta purentee don't even want on the place."

"I sorry." His eyes filled with tears. "But what I going to do, Lucretia Borgia? What am I going to do?"

"You got to decide if you want to pleasure a woman or not—"

"Of course I do!" He stared at her uncomprehendingly. "They's nothing I wants more. All I ever is wanted. All my life I wanted to have a gal what loved only me and belong only to me. I like other men, Miz Lucretia Borgia. I jes' lookin' for a little happiness in this life, that's all. Looks like everything I want is barred to me. Got no right to live and love and find no happiness. Now you tell me I got no right even to want a son of my own."

"I tellin' you what's true here at Falconhurst. I tellin' you what keeps you alive and healthy, and that is pleasin' the white masta." She walked slowly to him and touched his face gently, drawing him to her in a way that was at once comforting and seductive. He swallowed hard at his own Adam's apple. "We jes' niggers, son. Tha's all we are. Our skins is black and we belongs to the white masta, and what he tells us is what we do. We can live 'round the outside of happiness, but tha's all, 'cause we got to think first 'bout savin' our skins in a white man's world. We got to jump when he say jump. We got to make the best of our lives that we kin. But mostly we got to learn to git along on the crumbs that white people throw to us. An' we got to stop tryin' for things we cain't have. Maybe someday, somewhere else, you find a better life. But right now, here at Falconhurst, I tryin' to keep you alive—and the way to do that is to make you a nigger-breedin' stud. Or you in big trouble."

"You a wonderful lady, Lucretia Borgia." He put his arms around her and embraced her as if she were his mother.

"You in big trouble," she told him. "And I in big trouble, 'cause I put my faith in you, and you fail me."

"Ain't wants to fail you."

"Ain't what you wants what counts a diddly, son. It's what the white folks thinks that counts. They think you is like a gelding, they treat you like a gelding. An' ain't no place for a gelded nigger on this farm. You a man, you got to show them white people you is a man. Tha's what counts. What you kin make them white folks think about you. They ain't very smart, but God, they think they is. An' you got to make 'em think you believe they is smart—maybe a little less smarter than God Hissself. Makes no different how you laughin' inside, you bowin' and scrapin' on the outside."

"God bless you, Miz Lucretia. I know you tryin' to help."

"We got to find out if'n you ain't got no sap, why you ain't. If'n you cain't do it with a lady, I got to know why."

"Don't know why." He writhed, agonized against her. "I just cain't do it, Miz Lucretia Borgia. Cain't . . . Minute I sees a lady nekked, my ole tokus, he jump up, hard as iron, and start a-shootin', all over everything."

She stared at him. No one had told her this. She said, "You got to learn to hold back."

He groaned in agony. "Cain't hold back, Miz Lucretia. I try. I bite my mouth so hard it bleeds. I ache all the way down. But when I start buckin' an' shootin' right off, them ladies gets all upset and mad with me. Wastin' it, they say. Sayin' I ain't no good to them an' I cain't even wait to git it in 'em. . . . Ain't I cain't . . . God knows I cain't. An' I sorry."

She stroked his arm. "You got to think 'bout somethin' else."

"Cain't." He shook his head. "God knows. I hardly think 'bout nothin' else when I ain't even tryin' to mount a lady."

She gazed at him gently. "Well, if'n you gonna be any good to Masta Warren, an' me, an' do yo'self a favor at the same time—you gonna have to learn to control that thing. . . . You got to think 'bout somethin' else—"

"I tell you, Miz Lucretia Borgia. They *ain't* nothin' else."

She laughed and moved against him lightly. "You *sound* like a man afta my own heart. . . . You know what's important, all right. . . . But we got to teach you to harness that stallion, leastways till the race starts."

He looked ready to cry. "How we going to do that?"

"We goin' to teach you. That's how." Slowly, she retreated a step from him. Watching his lovely young face, stricken and pallid at the moment, she removed her dress. Fascinated, he stared at the fullness and ripeness of her high-standing breasts, colossal melons, the symmetry of her belly and thighs, the strength and lines of her shapely legs. God knew, he had been with pretty girls, but this was a gorgeous, full-blown woman, so beautiful it hurt to look at her nakedness.

When Satyr stood immobile and unmoving, bewitched at her nakedness, she said, "Drop them pants, boy. Cain't teach you nothin' less'n you drop them pants."

He nodded, and, moving like an automaton, he dropped his osnaburg pants. Now it was Miz Lucretia Borgia's turn to gasp. Her mouth sagged open, her throat going dry. She had seen Satyr naked in the yard and she had been impressed—in fact, he had stirred fantasies in her that over these past nights had boiled into overheated delirium. But she had never before seen such an erection as burgeoned upon this youth. She stared, incredulous at that instrument of delight. It quivered, rigid, sturdy enough to hang a bucket of cement on, though why it should be wasted so, she could not think. Staring at him, she felt herself growing warm, liquid, and uneasy between her thighs.

"Oh, my Gawd," she whispered. She reached out to touch him, but at the caress of her fingertips he cried out in a kind of agonized horror and began to ejaculate. He stood there with the juices spewing from him. He did not even touch the throbbing colossus when it spurted toward the rafters. "Jesus. Dear Jesus," Miz Lucretia

whispered. She stared at him, awed. "You pop fo' we even played 'round a minute—"

"I tole you," he moaned.

She shook her head, disbelieving. "You nearly hit the ceiling."

"Could of hit it," he said with a shamed kind of pride. "Could of. . . . Just too 'shamed, with you a-watchin' . . . tried to hold back."

She shook her turbaned head, still unable to credit all she had seen. "We cain't no way waste this here wonder," she declared. "No way . . ."

His eyes brimmed with tears. "Ain't no good. Tokus won't stand up again—for five—ten minutes now. . . . An' when it do, I looks at them pretty titties, which I never seen anythin' so pretty in all my life, like pears and upstandin' an' them nipples, an' that smooth skin, jes' made for a man to be lovin' . . . and those pretty hairs 'round your tender parts . . . oh, Gawd. It come up, but then it start spurtin' and spittin' the minute it spy yo' pretties."

Miz Lucretia Borgia sighed, facing a challenge that suddenly roused her. "Then we face that when it happen. We stay here and we keep raisin' him up till he gits tired enough to behave. . . . We got somethin' too good to waste here. . . . You learn to control that club, you knocks up ever' dam an' mare what you mount and sock it to. . . . First time. . . . That good stuff of your'n—thick and rich and served up by the ladle—lordy, it shoot so far up in 'em, couldn't nuthin' wash it out."

He exhaled, pale with self-hatred. "Only I got to git it up in 'em first."

She smiled and drew him down to the cot beside her. "You jus' relax. Don't you worry. Thank Gawd, ain't nothin' wrong with you but you young. Somethin' you goin' outgrow. . . . I teach you how to git it up in 'em. . . . Oh, I teach you that, all right. Goin' to be a real massive pleasure, teachin' you."

She kicked her dress across the floor and put her arms about him. Shyly, he touched the fullness of her breasts,

clasping and caressing them. He bent and nursed her nipples. With her hand on him she felt him start to react to those desires and frenzies bubbling and boiling inside him. She clung to the tumescent muscle, stroking it lightly as blood pulsed fiercely into it.

"Be careful," he whispered. "Done tole you. Cain't stand very much."

"Don't think 'bout it," she said. "Kiss me. . . ." He placed his lips upon hers and she pushed the point of her tongue between his teeth, thinking he tasted sweet as nectar. She felt him grow more rigid in her palm.

"Oh, Gawd." A shudder racked him.

"Don't talk," she whispered against his face. "Jus' don't worry 'bout nothin'. Don't think 'bout pesterin'. . . . Jus' hole me and touch me."

For a moment longer they stayed there enraptured, their hands and tongues and lips busy. "Oh, Gawd," he moaned. "Cain't stand it no longer."

"You got to stand it, 'cause you got to wait." She kissed his mouth fiercely and he watched the top of her red-turbaned head as she drew her lips over his chin, along his throat, going downward, slowly, maddeningly, across his thick-muscled chest.

He sagged against her at last, successful, sated, satisfied, and arrogant with triumph. He kissed her lips gently. "Don't see how I evah want some other lady, after you."

She smiled tiredly, but she was already wondering what time it was, and how things were going at the manor house when she was not there to supervise them. God knew, it must be hours past lunchtime. She smiled faintly. Well, even if Master Warren thought she had earned a whipping, for the first time in her life she considered the price worth it. Whatever happened to her, this day had been worth it.

She stroked his face gently. "You a man," she said in a soft, loving tone. "A real man . . . You manage to want some other woman . . . when you sees her nekked,

and sees her pretty wide-open invitin' you . . . you manage."

"But you more than that to me, Miz Lucretia. . . . You my goddess, Miz Lucretia Borgia. . . . I worship you like I heah you suppose to worship the gods. . . . It you I worship. . . . Ain't nothin' in this world I wouldn't do for you."

She laughed. "You do talk extravagant. . . . Don't fret. . . . You done plenty fo' me. . . . Now, I wants you jes' to knock up these black gals 'round here good as you can for me, quick as you can. . . . That's the bes' thing you can do for me."

He grinned, yawning helplessly. "I gits right to that job, quick as I recovers, Miz Lucretia Borgia."

She laughed and kissed him. "I know you will."

XI

Cousin Vesta stood, a shadow in deeper shadows, just inside the kitchen doorway.

Miz Lucretia Borgia pulled open the door, hurrying. She stopped as if poled, or she would have walked through the apparition. For a moment she remained unmoving, startled by the white woman's abruptly appearing as if by some black magic.

Vesta, in her black dress, wavered there like something unreal in the occluding shadows. The sense of fallacy of vision was intensified, of course, because Lucretia was half-blind stepping into the shadowy room from the blaze of sunlight in the barnyard. Too, there was her own lassitude. She was dog-tired and ready to drop. The backs of her legs felt too weak to support her weight. Surprise added to her confusion, and it was a long beat before she recovered.

Miz Lucretia Borgia gave Vesta a smile as broad as it was false and tried to step around her into the deserted kitchen.

Vesta remained immobile and adamant in the black woman's path, not stirring from that shadowed spot where she'd seemed to materialize from one of Lucretia Borgia's bad dreams.

Miz Lucretia Borgia caught her breath sharply. She

was totally unaccustomed to being barred or delayed anywhere on this farm.

With a faint smile twisting her murrey mouth, Vesta watched Lucretia Borgia unblinkingly and her black eyes seemed to glow—emptily—the way a cat's eyes glow in the dark.

Cousin Vesta's soft voice rasped with the steel in it. "Where have you been these past three hours?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "Been busy . . . ma'am."

"Don't you dare take that uppity tone to me, you lazy Negress."

Miz Lucretia almost yawned in the white woman's face. The yawn came only partly from fatigue; the frustration tightened Lucretia's stomach into a knot. "Ain't lazy. . . . Got to run this heah farm. . . . Whether it please you or not, Missy, I got things to do."

"I shall certainly report this impudence to Cousin Warren."

"Yes'm . . . Well, why don't you do that? I used to havin' Masta Warren ax me where I been, 'cause I his nigger. But I don't belong to nobody else. You jus' tell him when you got some complainin' 'bout me."

"You have got to learn. Now. I won't tolerate this arrogant tone from you. And I'll tell you something else, girl. I want you where I can find you when I need you."

Miz Lucretia Borgia stepped around her now and went across the room to the scrubbed kitchen table. Cousin Vesta pursued her on silent feet. Miz Lucretia glanced over her shoulder. "Reckon we got plenty other black house gals to do yo' beck, Miss Vesta."

Vesta caught her breath savagely. "If you know what's good for you, *you'll* do my *beck*—"

"No, ma'am."

"How dare you take that insolent tone to me?"

"Want you to be comfortable and waited on and satisfied long as you is here, Missy. But I reckon I got all I can do—takin' care of the masta—and this heah big

farm. We got two—three hundred niggers, somebody got to look after.”

Vesta gazed at her along her patrician nose. “Don’t you think perhaps you’re assuming too much authority for an ordinary black woman?”

“Maybe I is. But somebody got to do it.”

“It seems to me, girl, that you’re far too arrogant for your place in life. You’ve got to be shown your place. The responsibility you have assumed is rightfully a white person’s obligation, isn’t it?”

“Maybe it is. But ain’t no white pusson heah now to do it. If’n I don’t do it, it don’t git done.”

“I think you can come down off your high horse now, Lucretia. Master Bower and I are here. We are part of dear Cousin Warren’s own family. We shall assume control. Whatever happens will be our obligation. You may return to your menial tasks—for which, hopefully, you are trained.”

“What menial tasks is that, Missy?”

“Cleaning. Cooking. Sweeping. Dusting. I don’t care. See that the beds are changed and the rooms dusted.”

“I see. . . . Well, I ’fraid I has to go on like I is until Masta Warren hissself tell me to do otherwise, Missy. But if yo’ bedroom need cleanin’, I’ll sho’ see to that. At once.”

Vesta caught her breath. She shook her head. “That won’t be necessary.”

These words were like a red cape to a maddened bull. Miz Lucretia Borgia saw that the first chore she offered to accomplish was the last thing Cousin Vesta wanted. In that moment she made up her mind that the woman’s bedroom would be scoured as it had never been before if it were the last act of her life.

She didn’t feel it would be, though. She felt certain it was merely the first exchange of gunfire between two implacable enemies. She gazed at Cousin Vesta in hatred, and her heart pounded erratically in her rib cage, but she felt not a trace of fear.

Whatever other emotions Cousin Vesta stirred inside Lucretia Borgia, fear was not one of them.

Defiantly, with the defiance barely sugared with an exaggerated smile of servility, Miz Lucretia said, "You excuse me now, Missy, I see 'bout gettin' gals in to clean yo' room—"

"I told you that won't be necessary."

Miz Lucretia shook her head, still smiling in false humility. "Cleanin' up my house—an' keepin' it clean—that most necessary, Missy. I sorry you has had to call it to my attention, but from now on it be done, it be done regular an'—"

She paused, meeting the white woman's gaze with a chilling smile. "It be done when I say."

"You arrogant bitch." Miss Vesta looked as if only supreme self-control kept her from lashing out and striking the servant across the face. "Maybe that is the way things were. Understand me. It is my word from now on. My orders."

Miz Lucretia merely shrugged her full shoulders and bit back another yawn. "Sorry, Missy. You a guest here. But I runs this house. You ast the masta 'bout that. Not even the masta tell me what to do 'bout runnin' my house—or my niggers."

"Things are changing, girl. Don't you have sense enough to understand that? They won't be that easy, slovenly way anymore. You'll take your orders from me. You'll do what I say, when I say. Things will be done as I order from now on."

Miz Lucretia Borgia shook her head but continued to smile obsequiously. "Sorry, Missy. You have to git the masta to say these things to me."

"That's the point I'm trying to make. From now on I speak for Cousin Warren."

"Yes'm. That what you say. I reckons to obey you when I heahs all this from the masta hisself."

"You stupid Negress. Don't you understand I'm trying to do you a favor? Don't you realize that Cousin Warren would likely order you whipped if he had any inkling of

the arrogant, impudent way you have back-talked me in here? Why can't we understand each other?"

"I hopes we can, Missy. That's why I tells you I got to do things as I see they need doin' . . . long as I here on this place."

Vesta stared at her, incredulous, shaking her head. "You do need the whip."

Miz Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "Maybe I do, Missy. That up to the masta. Meantime, you excuse me, I go get your room all freshed up."

Vesta had relaxed slightly, now she sucked in a deep breath and stared at Lucretia Borgia, almost quivering in rage. "You stay out of my room, Negress. Do you understand that? Stay out of my room."

Cousin Vesta had thrown down the gauntlet. Miz Lucretia Borgia took it up, ready for combat. She glanced through the screen door to the gallery where Master Warren regaled his guests with the rising price of black flesh on the auction vendues, on the bloodlines, and how to purify and improve them. Cousin Vesta sat beside him, her gaze upon his face, rapt. Bower sagged in his chair, yawning covertly behind his hand.

Armed with pails, mops, soaps, and scouring liquids, Miz Lucretia led a squad of house girls, Myra Belle, Dianna, and harelipped little Carrie, up the rear stairwell to the second floor.

She marched along the silent, cavernous upper hallway like a sergeant with troops. Distantly, she could hear Master Warren's voice, strengthening as he found new reason for living. She was glad, for his sake, that Cousin Vesta had come to visit. This other matter—this battle of wills between them—was something else. There had to be some conclusion; there could be no accommodation, no compromise. Miss Vesta didn't want that.

Miz Lucretia Borgia smiled coldly. In her heart neither did she.

She paused outside Miss Sophie's bedroom. The room had not been slept in since Miss Sophie died. It was

almost exactly as the dying woman had left it. Master Warren seldom entered it, but he wanted the look of familiarity if he did go in there for any reason.

Miz Lucretia touched the knob, found the door locked. "Damn her," she said under her breath. Shoving her apron aside, she took a large ring from her dress pocket, shook out a large iron master key and unlocked the bedroom door. She threw the door open with an almost vengeful thrust, a feeling of faint triumph. Another little battle won.

She entered, followed by the cleaning girls. Miz Lucretia Borgia paused near the foot of the old wood-framed bed with its high canopy. She looked around, shocked.

Miss Vesta might be personally smart and elegant, but her room was unbelievably messy and disarrayed. She could hardly believe the white woman could have caused so much havoc in such a brief time.

She said, "White women messy as sows. Ever' one I evah seen. But none bad as this here one. Want this place scrubbed down, from ceiling to floors and under the bed. Do I find one speck of dust, I takes it out of yo' hides—the three of you. You ain't goin' be slovenly as this white woman. An' I tells you what else I wants. 'Fore you leaves this room, I want it lookin' like that white woman ought to keep it, but don't. I want all her belongin's put away, neat and tidy."

"I don't want my things touched at all," Cousin Vesta said from the doorway, where she had appeared so silently that none of the slaves had heard her approach.

Miz Lucretia merely smiled at her. "We have your room all tidied up smart as can be in jus' a li'l while, Missy."

"Damn you." Vesta's voice shook. "I told you to stay out of here. I told you not to come into my room."

"An' I tole you, Missy. I sorry, but I cain't do that. You ast these heah gals, they tell you. We freshen up evah room in this house, every blessed day of the world."

Vesta clenched her white fists at her sides. "I don't

care about that, Lucretia. I don't have to ask these poor girls. I gave you an order and I expect you to obey it . . . I warn you, Lucretia. You will do as I say, or I will get rid of you—"

"*You'll* get rid—"

"You may as well understand, black girl. You're not some kind of privileged being around here. You may have been. But that is over. I am here at Falconhurst to stay. I mean to stay here forever. Is that clear to you? From now on I'll be here, and I'll be in charge. You just make up your mind to that."

XII

A disquieting silence persisted through the morning. Master Warren was still not out of bed at ten-thirty. This was unheard of in the first place, because Maxwell was a habitual early riser; throbbing pain in his hip and along his thigh, a numbness in his lower legs and a weakening bladder wakened him soon after dawn, and he always found returning to sleep impossible. It was easier to get up, plod downstairs to his parlor rocker, and start the day with a hot toddy. And even more upsetting was the fact that since the arrival of Cousin Vesta and her husband a week earlier, the master resented and resisted anything that delayed or interfered with his continuing vigorous family-oriented dialogues with his lovely relative on the shaded veranda. He appeared happier than he had in years, and quivering with anxiety to start each new day with his captive audience.

Miz Lucretia Borgia climbed the stairs a dozen times through the morning. She went along the silent upper corridor and pressed her ear against the closed bedroom door, listening. She stayed there until she could convince herself she heard Master Warren's deep, regular breathing, then she returned to her chores.

As the morning wore away she could not find any-

thing to occupy her except in the corridor outside Master Warren's silent bedroom.

Troubled, she prowled the corridor. She checked the cleaning girls a dozen times. She polished glass that shone with polish. She stood outside Master Warren's bedroom door, holding her breath.

She stood in the corridor, poised on the balls of her feet. Her eyes clouded with pain. For the first time she considered the mortality of her master. He was far from a robust man, and yet the fact that he might suddenly die had scarcely entered her mind. She was by nature an optimistic and cheerful woman. She thought of death and famine in China in the same context: distant and unrelated to her existence. Now she saw that death could stalk into that room at any moment. What would happen to her if Master Warren died abruptly, and with Master Ham somewhere in Texas? What would happen to Falconhurst?

A whisper of sound, almost as if in answer to her question, and Cousin Vesta materialized from the vague dark places of the corridor. Miz Lucretia had no idea how long the white woman had been standing there, blending into the shadows.

"What are you doing, standing out here in the corridor?" Vesta said.

Miz Lucretia Borgia turned, aware of the hackles that prickled, unwanted, across the nape of her neck. She drew a deep breath and shrugged. "I worried about my masta," she replied.

"Worried?"

"He's overslept three—four hours now."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"It mighty unusual. It most unlike him. I jus' decidin' I go in an' take a peek to be sure he all right."

"Why wouldn't he be all right?"

"I don't know, Missy. Why wouldn't he be up, like he up usual—little after daybreak?"

"He was up late last night. Maybe he's tired."

"Masta don't enjoy layin' abed. I heard him say that many times."

"He's getting older. He's an old man. If he wants to sleep, you let him sleep. . . . And get about your chores."

"Reckon I too worried to work."

Vesta laughed, a cruel, cutting sound. "Too worried. Too tired. Too involved in matters that don't concern you. A wonder you ever get anything done."

Miz Lucretia sighed, but said nothing. Vesta said, "That's enough. I forbid you to disturb your master. Get on about your work."

"Ain't meanin' to disturb him, ma'am. No way. But if'n he sleepin' an' he all right, won't hurt none jes' to look in on him."

Vesta stepped toward her as if she would strike her across the face with the back of her fragile hand. "Didn't you hear me, girl? I told you to stay away from that room. I forbid you to go in there."

"I heard you, ma'am." Miz Lucretia winced and stepped around the slender woman.

Vesta's voice stopped her. "You persist in behaving as if my warnings to you were idle threats."

Miz Lucretia met those chilled black eyes. "No, ma'am. I'm sure you'll do whatever you can to git rid o' me. I sorry about that, but I jus' ain't got time to fret about it."

With Vesta at her shoulder, Miz Lucretia Borgia stealthfully turned the knob on her master's bedroom door. She pushed the door open, and it whined faintly in the exaggerated mid-morning silence. She stepped through into the tightly closed room.

The room itself seemed suspended in time. With the windows locked tightly against the dangerous night drafts, the curtains and heavy damask shades drawn, it might have been the middle of the night in there. A faint lancing of light sliced in behind the two women from the corridor. Clothing was jumbled about on chairs and on the floor. The bed was rumpled, the heavy covers thrown

back. In his cotton nightgown twisted about his body, Maxwell, sprawled out on his back, his arms flung out on each side of him, looked vulnerable, helpless, and very old—twenty years older than his actual age. His mouth was open; he breathed half through his nose, making a choked, snoring sound when he inhaled.

“There,” Vesta whispered. “He’s simply asleep. Are you satisfied?”

But Miz Lucretia was far from reconciled. Looking as if he were sodden from his toddies and overwhelmed with spiritual and physical exhaustion, Maxwell lay, wretched in sleep, like a fevered child.

She approached the bed slowly. She had known, but had not admitted to Cousin Vesta in the hallway, that when she entered Master Warren’s room, he would waken instantly. He was a light sleeper who came awake, crying out at the faintest sound. He never had admitted it, and would not, but she knew the aging man was afraid of the dark.

Miz Lucretia bent over the recumbent form of her master. His ruddy, sun-braised face looked ashen under its seasoned surface. His cheeks were pallid.

She touched his forehead with the palm of her hand. She reacted, jerking away from the fevered heat. Again she placed her hand upon his burning-hot forehead. He did not stir. Now she knew something was wrong, desperately wrong.

Troubled, she went to the windows, pulled back the shades, put up the curtain, and thrust the windows upward. Breezes billowed into the room. She turned. “He burning up with fever.”

Vesta did not speak, merely stood in the center of the room, watching her.

Miz Lucretia went back to the bed. “Masta got a bug of some kind. I send Mem a-hurryin’ fo’ Doc Redfield.”

“Isn’t Redfield a veterinarian?”

“He the only doctor we have on this farm. Town doctor carry the clap. Masta won’t ’low him on the place.”

Within two hours Mem returned from Seven Mile Road with Doc Redfield. The vet drove his wife's single-seat runabout, drawn by a prancing young Tennessee Thoroughbred. The doctor had moved up in the world since he had married the Widow Johnson. There were those who said he earned every dime he received. They said that the widow looked like a witch with a hangover, nagged like a shrew, and screeched like a banshee when things didn't go to please her. Whether this was factual or not, Doc did not hesitate when Mem arrived with news that Master Warren was feeling poorly. Warren Maxwell was Doc's dearest friend. Any excuse to escape Seven Mile Road was always appreciated.

He swung down from the buggy, allowing the servant boys to lead the horse and vehicle away. He came up onto the gallery, where Vesta sat with Bower Ledbetter. He carried his medical kit, giving Bower a passing glance and honing his gaze in on Vesta's fragile and elegant beauty. "Well," he said, smiling. "Mem didn't say they was company, and beautiful company at that."

Bower stood up and bowed. When Redfield came up onto the porch, he extended his hand. "I am Mr. Bower Ledbetter, of Alexandria, Louisiana, suh. And this charmin' lady is mah wife, Miss Vesta Hammond Ledbetter."

Redfield touched briefly at Bower's hand, took Vesta's fingers, and kissed them vigorously. He straightened, charmed and fascinated by her, unable to take his eyes from her face. "Most delighted to make your acquaintance," he said. "So you is a Hammond? You related to the late Theophilus Hammond's family?"

"I am Miss Sophie's own dear cousin," Vesta said. "I suppose I am the nearest relative Cousin Warren has in the world."

"Well, ain't ole Warren fortunate." Redfield touched at his mustache with the backs of his fingers. "It good to have relatives on the place when sickness strikes." He

glanced around. "Sort of halfway expected Warren would be up and movin' by the time I got here."

"No." Bower shook his head. "The poor fellow. Still in bed. He was still sleeping last time Vesta checked."

"I would be up there with him now," Vesta said. "But that fat and officious black woman—"

"Lucretia Borgia?" Redfield inquired.

"—is with him. She and I don't do well in the same room. She is one of the most arrogant black women I have ever encountered."

Redfield grinned. "She uppity, all right. But she smart. You'd swear she was human, smart as she is."

"Well, she may be smart, but she is simply overstepping her mark," Vesta said.

"Oh, she don't mean no harm. She jus' been runnin' things here at Falconhurst so long, she don't know any better."

"Perhaps." Vesta drew a sharp breath. "It is just that I am not accustomed to dealing with blacks who don't know their place. . . . I don't know how long I can tolerate her—unless someone teaches her simple etiquette."

"Well, jes' let ole Lucretia run things for you around here. You'll learn to be thankful for her wisdom and cleverness one day."

Vesta shook her head. "I don't think so. . . . She's not my type of nigger."

Doc Redfield gave her a warm smile. "Reckon I'll just run up and take a look at ole Warren. . . . If you folks ain't et dinner yet, and it won't discommode you too much, I'll be pleased to join you, soon as I visit the sick room. Nobody ever likes to miss a Falconhurst noon meal—mos' lavish set table in this part of Alabama." He kissed his fingers. "An' food cooked fit for angels."

"We'll be pleased to have you," Vesta said. "Though I must say I still find it quaint that human beings are treated by a veterinarian at Falconhurst."

Redfield paused at the screen door and smiled over

his shoulder. "You wouldn't want to get what the medical doctor in Benson carries with him."

"What's that?" Bower inquired.

"Venereal disease, suh," Redfield said. "Goes 'round dispensing placebos and spreadin' the clap, ever'where he goes."

He laughed and went on into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him. He saw Miz Lucretia Borgia standing, awaiting him tensely at the head of the stairs.

Warren wakened while Doc Redfield was checking his temperature. His eyes focused only weakly. He shook his head, his voice querulous. "Wha's matter? Doc, what hell you doin' here?"

"You fell little under the weather," Redfield said. "Runnin' a little fever."

Maxwell rolled his head back and forth on the pillow. "What time is it?"

"Tuesday." Redfield grinned at him. "What you care? You layin' up here sleepin' your life away anyhow."

Maxwell struggled. He glanced toward the window, reckoning the time. "I got to git up."

"You got to stay right there till Lucretia and me figure what the hell is gone wrong with your insides."

Maxwell tried to get up. He was too weak. He could not do it. Even that brief exertion left him short of breath, gasping through the mouth. They saw the panic swirling in his bloodshot eyes. "Doc!" his voice fluted. "Doc. What's the matter with me?"

"Don't know yet. Take some studyin'. . . . Tell you what. We goin' give you a good purgative, and I'll stay 'round, day or so, see how you come along."

XIII

Doc Redfield sat down at his usual place before the dining room table. He had scrubbed his hands, slapped his shirt back around his wrists, and shrugged into his frock coat with Lucretia Borgia's assistance. Without looking around now, he took up the red-and-white-checked napkin and stuffed it into his shirtfront, spreading it biblike over his potbelly and stained weskit. He said nothing and did not bother looking around. He was aware that Miz Lucretia Borgia stood unobtrusively a few feet from the head of the table, overseeing the service, her hands folded under her apron. But he was far too accustomed to putting his feet under this table to stand on any ceremony. Everything appeared about as usual to him. He was not a very observant man at best, and those places long familiar to him he took for granted, like a nearsighted man too disinterested to press his glasses up on his nose.

He did sense a mild aura of change, a new formality in the old room. The welcomed scent and aromas of the food enticed him, and he was most aware of this; too, he was hungrier even than usual. He didn't bother to survey the room or to question any altered situations, except to feel a faint passing regret that his old friend Maxwell was too far under the weather to come out and

eat this meal at table. The old master's chair, at the head, remained unoccupied, his dinnerware set formally before it as it would be each setting until he did return. If he returns, Doc Redfield amended in a quick, rueful lament.

Things seemed about as always to Redfield. Falconhurst had grown to be like a second home to him over the years, this immense, sparsely furnished room with its high ceilings and dark walls a revered sanctuary. The aged, ornate mahogany sideboard of the Empire period had squatted against one wall as long as he could remember. The large, rectangular table seemed diminished in the middle of the oversized room. Its covering of heavy damask cloth with familiar red-and-white-checked patterns reassured him. The revolving caster of cruets and condiments decorated the center of the table as it had since the days when the late Miss Sophie Hammond Maxwell had presided at table, like a fusty queen, as he recalled. The plates were ornamented with baked-in paintings of Chinese temples and pagodas, and each was flanked with a matching bone dish and coffee cup in saucer. Pressed-glass goblets and heavy silverware were set out in precise geometric designs. No food was visible, and none appeared for some taut moments while Doc poised there, his fork clasped in his right fist.

Redfield began to become aware of some of the changes already taking place in this house under Cousin Vesta. Growing restive, he looked up to find Cousin Vesta and her husband, Bower, in chairs across the table, with their heads bowed in silent prayer. Redfield hesitated, shrugged, and bowed his own head. Cousin Vesta then nodded and Bower intoned some interminable, and mercifully almost unintelligible, prayer that asked divine blessing on everything from the ailing Master Warren in his bed of ordeal upstairs to the dessert dishes on the sideboard. Only when this exhortation finally ebbed and decreased did Cousin Vesta look up and nod in a cold, formal way toward Miz Lucretia. Then the black servants, girls and boys, as formally attired as anyone ever

was at Falconhurst, and barefoot, appeared with soup in tureens. Around the table other silent young slaves stood with aged bamboo fans working in slow, steady motion against the intrusion of flies and the pall of humidity.

Disappointed, Redfield set aside his fork and took up a soup ladle. He spooned it up, slurping loudly and taking up his dish and drinking down the last few peppery drops. "Good turkey and vegetable soup," he said, wiping the back of his hand across his mustache. "Ready now for the solid food, Lucretia."

But Lucretia hesitated. Her face reddening slightly, Cousin Vesta laid down her soup spoon and nodded imperiously toward her husband. Bower followed suit. Immediately, servants appeared to remove these dishes and to begin the parade of stewed chicken with round puffy dumplings, squash, okra, and boiled cabbage. "My lands," Doc Redfield said. "This looks even tastier than usual, Lucretia."

Again he was astonished that the black woman did not reply. Usually, if there was a lull in the conversation at the table, it was difficult to keep her quiet. He frowned faintly, glanced toward the servant, and then at the coldly unsmiling Cousin Vesta. He shrugged and attacked his food with his fork in his fist.

"Reckon you folks wonderin' how poor ole Maxwell is," Redfield said. "Give him a cathartic. More powerful than laxatives. Quicker and a lot more thorough. Soon had him evacuating profuse and watery. But got out whatever was inside him poisoning him—"

"Poison?" Cousin Vesta replaced her fork on the table and stared across it at the vet.

She had not reacted to his graphic explanation of treatment, but he saw that Bower had. The thin man had grown pale and sat with his teeth clenched. Now he set down his fork, the metal ticking loudly against the china-ware in the quiet room.

"Poison?" Cousin Vesta said again.

The veterinarian nodded profoundly. "That's right.

You folks done the right thing gittin' me over here fast as you done. Could of been fatal."

"Surely you're not serious," Cousin Vesta said.

"'Fraid I am, Missy. Ole Maxwell was poisoned all right."

"How?" Bower spoke for the first time. "By what?"

Redfield shrugged. "That I don't know. Might be something in the food. Something he ate."

Vesta jerked her head around and addressed Lucretia Borgia. "What could your master have eaten that might have poisoned him?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia shook her head. "Masta ain't *et* nothin' p'izen. Not from my kitchen."

"How can you know?" Vesta demanded.

"Jes' know, ma'am. One thing I know for sure. Masta ain't *et* nothin' the rest of us ain't *et*, and everybody else looks healthy."

"That's the truth," Redfield agreed. "But he got it somewhere. Somehow. Don't know what it was. Just that if it had been a little stronger, he would have been a goner before I could of got here. Let him rest awhile, and he'll be up again. But you got to watch him close from now on—first sign of anything wrong, get word to me."

"Of course we will," Vesta said.

"I watch," Miz Lucretia Borgia vowed. "From now on I be watchin' mighty close."

That night, a little after ten, Miz Lucretia Borgia, in her ankle-length cotton gown, sat on the side of her attic-bedroom cot.

Agamemnon, always slower than she in getting into his own cot, stood yawning and scratching, hoping against hope that Miz Lucretia Borgia would invite him to share her mattress and her charms, that at least she would speak to him in a way warm enough that he could interpret it as proffer. Finally, he surrendered to the facts of his existence and lay down. He stared across the small room at her. When she did not even move for a

long time, staring unseeingly at the floor, he said, "What ails you, gal?"

She shivered faintly and looked up. "You heah what Doc Redfield say today?"

" 'Bout what?"

"My Gawd, you stupid. Don't you care that Masta Warren on death's door?"

He shrugged.

Her voice lashed at him. "You stupid nigger. You think you got it bad with the masta. Wait till he do die and you left to the mercies of that—turkey vulture downstairs."

"You mean Miz Vesta?"

"She'll really take your hide off."

"She seems nice 'nough to me. For a white lady."

"My Gawd. You know why she's here? She thinks Masta Warren is going to die and she goin' take over Falconhurst."

"Where you evah git a fool idea like that?"

"From lookin' at her. It like lookin' evil right in the face. And now she is poisonin' Masta Warren. He don't die fast enough fo' her. She gone help him along a little."

"You talk crazy, gal."

"Ain't crazy. Doc Redfield say Masta Warren poisoned. I didn't poison him. Did you?"

He sat up in bed, shivering violently. "My Gawd, woman. Don't say nothin' like that out loud. These here walls, they got ears. You wants to git me lashed till I bleedin'?"

"All I know is that Masta got poison from somewhere."

He looked as if he might cry. "Will you stop sayin' these crazy things out loud? My Gawd. My Gawd. Somebody gwine heah you. And you know whose skin it goin' be? Goin' be mine. . . . I can feel that whip right now."

Miz Lucretia Borgia scarcely heard him. "Masta was all right before that strange-actin' white woman showed up heah at Falconhurst."

Mem shuddered, and whispered, "Even if what you

say make sense—an' it don't—how would she poison Masta?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Leastways, I don't know yet."

"You best keep your mouth shut. You don't know nothin'."

"But I got this feelin'—this terrible feelin'—in my bones."

Mem moaned, agonized. "You always gettin' feelin's in your bones of one kind or another."

She nodded complacently. "That's right. I has. An' I ain't nevah been wrong. I knowed there was something wrong 'bout that white woman the minute I seed her. . . . Jes' like I knows good as I knows my own name that I has seed her somewhere before, I know she come on this place like a pizen snake, meanin' no good to nobody."

"Why? She Masta Ham's own cousin. She got every right to come heah to visit."

"Visit? You heard her makin' any plans 'bout leavin', nigger? People what come to visit usually make plans to leave. Ain't heard her make no plans to go nowhere."

"That her business," Mem said, voice quavering. "Ain't none of your beeswax. . . . She a white lady. . . . She a Hammond. . . . She a cousin. . . . She stay long as she like. She go when she like. Ain't nothin' to you."

"The life of my own poor dear ole Masta Warren is somethin' to me. An' that woman has already tole me she ain't plannin' on leavin' Falconhurst. . . . She say to me. Right out. She mean to stay here forever."

"That her right. That twixt her and Masta Warren."

"It twixt her an' Masta Warren . . . if Masta Warren alive. . . . She say to me, she mean to stay at Falconhurst forever. She didn't say nothin' 'bout she meant to let Masta Warren stay here."

"My Gawd. You is gone loco. This is Masta Warren's own house."

"Mem, how stupid are you?"

He sniffed loudly but did not answer. She continued, her voice rasping. "Masta Warren almost died today.

He would have died if you had not gotten Doc Redfield from Seven Mile Road in time."

His voice shook. "Then you be thankful I got him in time, and you let it go at that."

"I cain't. You know I cain't."

"I know you better."

"How can I? How can I know that we gits Doc here in time—next time?"

He shuddered visibly. "Lord Gawd. You is crazy."

She stood up, plodding back and forth in the small room as if it were a cage, as if the world itself were a cage. She nodded at last. "Maybe you right. Maybe I am crazy. One of us is crazy, and that's the truth. Me or that weird an' evil white woman. . . ."

Vesta came suddenly upon Miz Lucretia Borgia in the corridor outside Master Warren's upstairs bedroom. The hallway swirled and smoked with midmorning shadows and silences. A blue jay screeched outside in a tupelo tree. Distantly, a cow lowed.

Miz Lucretia Borgia sucked in her breath in a sharp, startled gasp and lunged away from the faintly parted door through which she had been peering, holding her breath. It flashed through her mind that perhaps Cousin Vesta was an embodiment of evil, a wraith of pure wickedness, rather than a human being. Lucretia would have sworn the woman was in Master Warren's bedroom before she suddenly materialized in the shadowy hallway.

It took some seconds for Miz Lucretia Borgia to compose herself. She fought back the panic spinning inside her stomach.

Vesta's voice lashed at her, quiet but deadly. "What are you doing?"

Miz Lucretia spread her hands. She was caught and she was unaccustomed to lying, except to her aging master, and this was so simple as to be worthless as training in deception. "I jes' peekin' in on the masta."

"Oh? You sneaked the door open enough so you could peek in, did you?"

"Jes' wanted to be certain he all right. Didn't want to disturb him."

"Don't lie to me, girl. You were spying."

Miz Lucretia Borgia swallowed hard. She felt suddenly helpless against this clever and coldhearted woman. She could not even figure how Vesta had appeared *behind* her in this corridor when she had seen her enter Master Warren's bedroom a few moments earlier. Miz Lucretia said lamely, "Why I want to spy, Miss Vesta?"

"God knows. Perhaps only because you are a nosy, prying, inquisitive black woman. Whatever it is, I won't tolerate it."

"I's only lookin' out fo' mah Masta Warren." Some of Miz Lucretia's old defiance returned to her tone, though she felt insecure and troubled. Vesta stood unmoving. In a way she seemed as fragile as a reed, but she was not reedlike; she was rigid and unbending. Her eyes glittered like polished black steel.

Her voice remained modulated, soft but inflexible. "Yes. I am sure you are doing what you believe is best. But we won't need your strange concern for your master. I am here now. I am quite able to look out for Cousin Warren's welfare. If you know what is good for you, Lucretia Borgia, you will admit you are a black woman. Nothing but a black woman, with no real authority on this farm."

But Lucretia could not believe this. She had worked too hard and too long to reach her place of eminence; she could not believe it could be yanked from her so easily. She straightened and shook her head. "I sorry, Missy. I 'fraid I cain't do that. . . . I was here at Falconhurst . . . an' I was takin' care of things . . . an' lookin' out fo' my masta. . . . I was doin' all that 'fore you come here." She drew a deep breath. "I be here—lookin' out for Falconhurst an' my masta when you is gone."

Vesta gazed at her a moment and then she laughed, a strangely fluting and taunting kind of laugh. Lucretia Borgia felt the hackles crawl at the nape of her neck,

and she clenched her fists at her sides to hide the trembling in her hands. "Will you?" Vesta inquired. "That's most interesting, and, I promise you, we'll certainly see about that."

XIV

Master Warren Maxwell improved slowly.

The news of his near brush with death traveled fast across the countryside, from plantation to plantation and from sharecropper to dirt farmer. During the next few days neighbors arrived at Falconhurst by the dozen. They came to pay their respects and to hear the latest in a rumor-fed scandal of Negro attempts to poison the white master of Falconhurst. There were those who, upon hearing these reports, wanted to march upon Falconhurst with gun and torch and clean out "them heathen blacks." Such talk was especially rife at Pearl's tavern, where cooler heads were able only finally to prevail. As these men reminded the hotheads, even if some niggers had attempted to murder the white master, the Maxwells would not appreciate anyone's coming in and decimating their priceless herd of blooded animals. Still, Lewis Gassaway came with four men who were armed with both rifles and handguns. Though they were extremely polite and genteel of manner, they looked more like a posse than a party of well-wishers at a sick bed. Others arrived in more festive yet subdued spirit. They came in carriages, buckboards, and fine coaches, and on horseback. They came from Benson, townspeople who knew the Maxwells only slightly. There was

something about funerals and catastrophic illnesses that brought the people closer together, uniting them, at least briefly, in grief and concern. Many brought newly baked pies and cakes, fresh-cut flowers or foodstuffs, and all stayed for the forthcoming meal.

With the first influx of well-wishers, Master Warren insisted upon getting up out of bed, dressing, and greeting his guests in person, either on the gallery or in the cool of late afternoon, beside the hearth in his parlor. He was pale, his freshly shaven cheeks pallid. His voice was husky, throat constricted and burned raw by some foreign substance, Doc Redfield explained to the curious. What substance was that? Doc Redfield spread his hands. "I ain't got no idee in this world," he admitted.

Doc Redfield had remained at Falconhurst, physician in residence, from the first day Mem had summoned him from Seven Mile Road. That evening the vet had sent a brief note home to the Widow Johnson—as he still addressed his wife, though they'd been married for two or three years by now. He explained that his dear friend Warren was ill—at death's door from some mysterious cause—and he would be compelled to stay on at the farm until Maxwell's recovery permitted him to leave. He folded the letter and sighed, thinking that this evening he would crawl into a bed with a Falconhurst filly for his bedwench and would not have to take two stiff shots of straight corn whiskey in order to gird himself to leap between the covers with his wife. Every ill wind . . .

Lewis Gassaway cornered the doctor and Miss Vesta on the front porch. The plantation owner stood with his gun in the crook of his arm, his handgun in its holster at his belt, smiling in pious concern as if he held a bouquet of flowers for the sickroom. Behind the screen door and concealed from their view, Miz Lucretia Borgia stood, listening. She felt no sense of guilt, no compunction. She needed to know as much truth as she could learn about Master Warren's condition. What concerned the

health and well-being of the lord of the manor was vital to her.

"Don't want you holdin' nothin' back, Doc," Gassaway said. "Warren an' me been friends too long for that. Whatever the truth is, I want to know it. You can tell me the truth and let the chips fall where they will."

Doc Redfield winced. "I wish I knew the truth, Lewis."

"You don't have to spare me. You got some kind of bad trouble here at Falconhurst, you can count on me. That's what friends are for. I know Warren would do as much for me—was he able—God willin'."

Redfield shook his head. "But the truth is, Lewis, we jes' don't know. An' that's the truth."

"I heard he was poisoned."

"Well, it looks like he *took* something that surely poisoned him." Doc nodded, agreeing. "But we don't know what it was. An' we don't know where-at he got it. He was the only one ill, or we'd think maybe it was food poisoning—"

"The nigger cooks," Gassaway suggested. "They tryin' to poison him?"

"I told you." Redfield shook his head emphatically. "We don't think it was in the food."

"Why not?"

"Because nobody was affected by it but Warren hisself. If it had been in the food, some of these other folks, and even the house niggers what eat white folks' vittles, would of come down. But nobody did."

"That sounds mighty strange to me," Gassaway said.

"It sounds strange to me," Redfield said. "But that's the way it is. Warren had all the symptoms of poison. He was giddy. Pupils was dilated when I got here. His pulse was so feeble I could barely find it. His skin was clammylike. Whatever he ate, it burned his throat. Muscles were constricted and he was hoarse."

"And you got no idea what it was?" Gassaway persisted.

"I told you." Redfield shook his head. "He had only his regular meals—and his reg'lar toddies. An' Miss

Vesta here and her husband, they drank toddies along with him. You know he likes to have company when he drinks."

"Damn strange," Lewis Gassaway muttered, far from mollified.

Mem was awakened in the darkest hours before dawn. He sat up suddenly on his cot and bumped his head. He rubbed at the goose bump on his forehead, swearing. He stared at the dark form of Miz Lucretia, standing in her gown at the oriel window overlooking the plantation yard.

"What you doin', woman?" he said. "Middle of the night like this."

"I tryin' to think," she said over her shoulder. "You go back to sleep."

"How can I sleep? You prowlin' 'round, bumpin' things in the dark. Last week I ain't hardly had no rest—and you ain't slept atall."

"I been worried. I scairt, Memnon."

He laughed. "You? Scairt? I don't believe that."

"But I is. It ain't like the old days here at Falconhurst. Not since that strange white woman got here. Nothin' ain't right. I feel like I walkin' 'round on egg shells, like the floor itself goin' explode under me any minute at all."

"You jes' lookin' fo' trouble." He lay back down. "If'n you ain't feelin' trouble in yo' bones, you a-lookin' for it—where they ain't been none."

"Oh, they's trouble, all right," she said, speaking to the shadowed pane. "For the first time in my life I feel helpless against it. I don't know what to do. An' I admits to you, Mem, I's scairt of that white woman."

He laughed. "You ain't scairt of the devil hisself."

She sighed heavily. "If'n the devil smart, *he'd* be scairt of that witch."

"She ain't no witch." Mem yawned helplessly. "She jes' a white woman. No more strange than airy other white woman I's ever seed. They all weird, one way or

another. Jumpin' at shadows. Too refined to fart. Talkin' so prim and proper. An' walkin' right over you an' you gits in they way."

"This one is different. Yo' is right. Lots of white women is hypocrites. But with most of them, that's 'cause that's the way they was raised, by they parents, and teachers, and even they black mammies. But not this one. She worse than a hypocrite. She a fraud. She ain't nothin' she pretendin' to be."

"My Gawd," Mem whispered helplessly in the dark. "She is Master Warren's own flesh-and-blood relative—his own cousin—and you hates her for jes' one reason. She don't like you prancin' 'round this place uppity and too big for yo' britches. . . . Lots of people feel that way 'bout you, Lucretia Borgia."

"Ain't true," Lucretia Borgia said in a flat, cold tone. She was not really talking to Agamemnon at all; she was putting into words the thoughts that swirled in confusion in her mind, trying to put sense into them. "You see how she insists on prayin' 'fore every meal—"

"Lots of white folks do that."

"Not the way she do it. She *overdo* it." She nodded suddenly and emphatically. "That's it. She *overdo* it. She overdo everything. Like she ain't really what she say she is. Like she playin' a part."

"My Gawd, Lucretia Borgia. Go to sleep."

"Cain't sleep." She turned and leaned against the wall, smiling to herself in the darkness.

She remained there a long time, overwhelmed by the thoughts that clamored into her consciousness. "It true," she whispered. "She ain't what she say she is. That's why she try so hard at bein' what she say she is. That's why she overdo it. . . . I see genteel ladies . . . an' they don't act like Cousin Vesta—not even the prissiest of them. . . . They relax sometimes. They mo' at ease sometimes. . . . She ain't ever relax. . . . She ain't ever at ease. . . . She overdoin' all the time . . . like she tryin' to put on airs an' pretend she a lady when she ain't no lady at all."

"You jes' makin' trouble fo' yourself," Mem warned. "She ain't say she nothin' but Cousin Vesta Hammond—"

"I think she ain't no Cousin Vesta. Master, he ain't nevah even heard of no Cousin Vesta till she come here sayin' who she was."

"She say. Masta believe. All you got to do is believe and go to sleep."

"But all of a sudden I know now what been so wrong. I know her kind. I's knowed her kind all along. Tha's what bothered me so much. . . . I tell you, Mem, I heard her kind named what they is—when I was in New Orleans."

"New Orleans? When you in New Orleans, woman?"

"Oh, Memnon! Sometimes I think your brain is pure clabber. Sp'iled clabber at that. You must recollect. When Masta Ham and Masta Warren sold my twin boys to that hunchback dwarf Roche from New Orleans. That Roche what wanted my boys to use like they was little girls in his bed. An' him makin' simperin' little prissies out'n my boys. . . . An' I carry on so that Masta Ham and Masta Warren sells *me* off to that Mr. Roche."

Mem yawned. "I recalls."

"Sho' you do. It was when I was down there. I seed and heard a lot I ain't nevah dreamed went on on this earth. I heard Roche talkin' 'bout night-walkin' prostitutes. An' Roche and his friends, sometimes they bring them no-good women in to put on shows and debase them, 'cause they purely hated women and liked to make 'em do evil things that would make you sick. Roche, he hated them whores. He has no use fo' women of any ilk, but he purely did hate and despise streetwalkers. Nightshades. *Nightshades!* That's what Roche called them night-prowlin' whores with they affected manners and fancy-talkin' ways. How he used to laugh at them. That's the word I been tryin' to recollect ever since I seed that Cousin Vesta. . . . That what she recalls to my mind. . . . I know inside. . . . That what she is inside. . . . Nightshade . . . a night-prowlin' whore."

XV

Mem slept only fitfully the rest of that night, but Miz Lucretia Borgia did not sleep at all.

Mem viewed the situation hopefully. He figured that he and Lucretia had stayed up so late talking about that new white woman and the strange happenings at Falconhurst that Lucretia would oversleep that morning and allow him to sleep in. But it did not happen that way. Miz Lucretia was alternately lying down and pacing the floor. She was far too disturbed to sleep. She looked forward only to daylight, though she had no idea at all what she would do, or what she would be able to do, about Cousin Vesta Hammond, only that she wanted to be doing something—in broad light of day. “Nighttimes gives me the mollygrubs,” she said aloud. “And they is, evah since that woman come heah.”

An hour before her usual wakening time, Lucretia found she could no longer stay confined in this small attic room. It was like a sweated cage to her. She splashed water into an earthenware commode and washed her face vigorously, scrubbing under her arms and between her legs with the soapy cloth.

“Stop makin’ so much noise,” Mem protested, more than half asleep.

"Don't matter an' I make noise," Lucretia said. "You gettin' up?"

"What time is it?"

"It's time I tell you to git up from that bed and git dressed. You goin' downstairs with me. 'Cause I say you is."

Lifting his arm to fend off the roofing stud waiting to crack his skull, Mem sat up cautiously and peered through the window. The night sky hung soft and deeply purple, freckled with stars, and heavy with the cool scent of early morning. "Ain't time to git up," he said. He lay back down and pulled the blanket over his head.

She stood over him, nude, her melonlike breasts suspended above him like explosives. "You wants to gits up on your own, or you wants me to pour my bathwater over your lazy skull?"

He surrendered to her stronger will as he had ever since he had first encountered her. Filled with self-hatred, he admitted it. Lucretia was a strong-willed woman, and he was a weak-willed man. He had no chance against her. He managed to dress, yawning, and to stumble down the rear stairwell in her wake, she carrying a lamp just over her head to light their way.

In the kitchen Mem staggered across the room to a cane-bottomed chair at the table. He sagged into the chair and pillowed his head on his arms upon the table. In moments he was snoring.

Lucretia Borgia was content, having him physically present as company. The mollygrubs that possessed her recently did not quite translate into a fear of the dark, more a dread of loneliness, a need for company, even the company of an exhausted Agamemnon.

She made a fire in the stove and set coffee on to percolate in the huge old blue enameled ironware six-quart coffeepot. She went about then, setting out ingredients for her planned breakfast—biscuits, scrambled eggs, sliced ham, grits, red-eye gravy, and fried chicken. She talked as she worked. She talked aloud because Mem was there, but she really spoke to herself.

"I got it all figured out," she said aloud. "I's figured how that Vesta woman could pizen Masta Warren." She thought this over a moment, then crossed the room to the table where Mem slept. She struck the tabletop with a large iron ladle. Mem leaped up, gouging at his eyes, yawning. "I say I figured how that white woman could of pizened the masta."

He yawned and shook his head. "She ain't pizened him."

"Somebody pizened him. And now I know the way it got to be. . . . You recall, evah since that Miss Vesta got heah, she been actin' so sweet and helpful fo' the masta? Cain't nobody do nothin' right for him but Miss Vesta. She been insistin' on takin' Masta Warren his toddies—evah time he wants a fresh one."

He nodded and laid his head back on his arms. "That real nice of her."

Miz Lucretia swore at him. "You don't give a damn *how* Masta gits his toddies, long as you don't have to shake yo' lazy legs."

"Let her take 'em to him. She want to take 'em, let her take 'em."

Miz Lucretia Borgia nodded. "Yes. That's just it. We let's her take them toddies to the masta. Her a-smilin' and a-simperin'. Well, I been watchin' her. . . . Somethin' else I see besides her simperin' smile. . . . Didn't mean nothin' till Doc say maybe Masta been pizened. You see the way that Cousin Vesta always stirs them toddies real good for him when she takes him a fresh one?"

"She jus' bein' nice."

"Or, she stirrin' up somethin' *extry* in that toddy—somethin' that she don't want the masta to taste or smell, but wants him to drink right down."

Mem awoke then. He sat up, staring bleary-eyed at her across the table. "She been puttin' pizen in them toddies?"

"Could of been," Miz Lucretia said, nodding. "Sho' could have been what she done."

"Oh, my Gawd." Mem leaped to his feet, looking around wildly.

"What's the mattah with you?"

"Them toddies . . . If'n that white woman been puttin' pizen in them, I dyin' . . . oh, my Gawd, I dyin' . . . 'cause I been dreenin' off all them toddy glasses when the masta through drinkin' at 'em."

Trembling, he got up and paced the room. He went to a closed window and stared at his reflection in the pane as if seeking signs of approaching death.

He turned and staggered into the liquor closet. Miz Lucretia knew he was drinking the master's corn whiskey, straight from the bottle.

This morning she did not bother to reprove him.

Somehow, Miz Lucretia Borgia contained her anxieties until ten o'clock, when the first of the neighboring well-wishers arrived.

She felt as if ants crawled just under her skin, as if she could not exist in her own body without finding out the answers to her fears. She supervised the serving of breakfast, watching Doc Redfield wolf down his food. Cousin Vesta ate with an exaggerated daintiness. Bower Ledbetter ate with genteel restraint but in the end put away more even than Doc Redfield.

Miz Lucretia could not keep her gaze off Vesta Hammond at the table. And yet she was afraid to stare at her too openly. The white woman seemed to sense when the servant was watching her. Vesta had a distracting way of jerking her head up suddenly, her fiery eyes fixed on Lucretia Borgia's, challenging and threatening at the same time.

Master Warren did not come downstairs until the first guests arrived around ten o'clock. Miz Lucretia and Mem washed him up, shaved him, and helped him don fresh clothing. Then they helped him down the stairs on tender feet, supporting him between them. He seemed to be recovering from the effects of the poisoning or illness or virus or whatever it was that had attacked

him. Mem seemed especially thankful for this and asked his master a dozen times if he felt better. Mem kept questioning until Maxwell raged at him, "Ain't no change, damn you, Mem. Ain't no better. Ain't no worse. You quit askin' after me like you give a damn in this world what happens to me. You don't care and I know you don't care."

"Oh, lordy, Masta," Mem whispered. "You wrong. . . . I care You never know how much I care."

Maxwell stared incredulously at his servant, and Lucretia Borgia had to bite back a smile despite the fears eating like acid at her insides.

They convoyed the master into the front room, where four neighbors were gathered along with Cousin Vesta, Bower Ledbetter, and Doc Redfield. As soon as the white people were seated in club chairs and on the aged sofa, Miz Lucretia Borgia clamped her fingers upon Mem's elbow and marched him out to the kitchen.

"What fo' you drag me out of theah like that?" Mem said.

"Nevah mind. You jus' come with me," Miz Lucretia Borgia said. She gave her kitchen underlings orders about filling requests from the front room for drinks and food, for responding immediately, and for not calling her. "I gone be busy fo' a little while. You runs the kitchen till I gits back. No mattah what anybody say, you don't call me."

She strode across the kitchen and up the rear stairs, with Mem in her wake.

On the second floor Miz Lucretia checked the hallway and all of the bedrooms. Where servant girls were cleaning up, she warned them to keep at their tasks. Then she went along the corridor to the head of the stairway.

She stationed Mem at the head of the stairs, back against the wall, where he could not be seen from the foyer below but from where he commanded a clear view of the lower floor.

"You stand watch here," she said.

"What fool thing you gone do now, Lucretia Borgia?" His voice shook.

"Nevah you mind what I gone do. I gone be in Miz Vesta's room—"

"Oh, my Gawd—"

"Hush now. All you got to do if she starts up them stairs is walk past her door and make a noise—jus' cough or clear your throat. You don't have to say nothin'. . . . Then you walk on into the masta's bedroom and stay there till I come for you. Do you understand that?"

"I think I gone pee my pants."

"You do, and I'll whop you good. . . . Mem, I ain't nevah ast nothin' of you. What I askin' now is real simple. You cain't git in no trouble less'n you fall asleep. You see anybody comin', you jus' walk into the masta's bedroom an' stay there. That ain't askin' too much."

"Sounds easy the way you say it, but somehow I got the idee goin' be the hardest thing I evah done in my life."

She swore at him under her breath and left him pressed against the wall at the head of the stairway. She crossed the corridor to Vesta's bedroom next to Master Warren's. She tried the knob, found it locked. She was not surprised. She fished out her key, unlocked the door, and slipped through it into the silent chamber.

She knew what she was looking for and she wasted no time. She was proficient at checking through drawers and carpetbags without leaving any traces of her search. She lifted handkerchiefs, underthings, waists, pantaloons and replaced them precisely.

In the carpetbag on the floor of the closet she found a small pouch. She removed the packet, loosened the silk cords securing it, and stared at the ground powder inside it. Her heart thudded in her rib cage. She was no expert on poisons, but instinct assured her she had found what she was looking for.

She inserted her little finger and took up a few flakes of the dark powder. Holding her breath, she placed the

tip of her pinky on her tongue. Her tongue seemed to constrict at the sharp, bitter taste.

More frightened than she had ever been in all her life before, she closed the tiny sack and replaced it in the carpetbag.

She almost ran across the room and into the hallway.

She sent Mem about his business. He escaped, almost running along the hall to the rear stairwell. "I on the way to the outhouse," he told her. "You done got my bowels all loosey-goosey. . . . Jes' hopes I can make it, that's all."

She barely heard him. Distracted, she walked slowly down the stairway to the entry. As she descended she heard the voices, the laughter, and joking from the parlor. There was a terrible kind of unreality about those sounds. It was only when Master Warren spoke—his voice weak and raspy—that she was convinced that what was happening was actual. She panted, bracing her hand on the newel-post, feeling as if she'd run a mile.

Miz Lucretia walked into those fevered sounds of laughter and voices rising to be heard above the din. She felt as if she waded into a perilous and thunderous surf. She stood for a moment, indecisive. At last, at a mild lull in the conversation she touched Doc Redfield's arm and, bending over, whispered to him, "Could I speak to you a moment, Doc? In the hall, please, suh?"

Doc glanced at the black servant impatiently. "What is it now, Lucretia Borgia?"

A brief, taut silence struck the room. Miss Vesta spoke sharply from her chair beside Master Warren's. "What ever is the meaning of this rude interruption, Lucretia Borgia? Don't you know better than to interrupt white folks when they are conversing?"

"Cain't stand an uppity nigger," someone said.

Master Warren laughed. "Well, Lucretia Borgia's 'bout the uppitiest nigger you ever goin' to meet."

"Her behavior is disgraceful," Vesta said.

"Has to agree with you, Cousin Vesta." Maxwell

shook his head, laughing. "She so uppity 'cause sometimes she fo'gits she is a nigger—gits to thinkin' she almost human."

"Perhaps she should be reminded," Vesta said. In all this time, she had not taken her gaze from Lucretia Borgia's face.

"Reckon you right," Maxwell said. "When Ham come home, we tetch her up with the bullwhip 'round the edges."

Vesta drew a sharp breath. "That may well be too late. She is a bad influence on your other animals, Cousin Warren."

He nodded complacently. "You right 'bout that too. I's warned her. Once her uppitiness got so we had to sell her off."

Doc Redfield gestured with upraised hand. "Lucretia Borgia's a good woman," he said. "She wouldn't come bargain' in 'less'n she had some good reason. I see what's the matter. You folks go right ahead visitin'. Excuse me."

He followed Miz Lucretia into the foyer, where he abandoned his smiling. "Now, what's the mattah, gal?"

"It's Big Pearl," Miz Lucretia said. "Need you to go down in the quarters with me and look at Big Pearl. That gal actin' mos' strange."

He scowled. "Big Pearl sick? Why, I never seed that gal off her feed in her whole entire life." Then he grinned and nudged Lucretia with his elbow. "Still, don't mind walkin' down there and lookin' her over for you. She something to look at, all right."

Miz Lucretia Borgia smiled. She had counted on this precise reaction from the lecherous old veterinarian. He seized upon any excuse in the world for fingering the females of the Falconhurst herds.

Miz Lucretia tried to walk sedately three or four steps behind the white man, but Doc Redfield moved too slowly for her. Long before they reached the slave quarters, she was striding ahead of him. Children and dogs ran out to greet them in the blaze of mid-morning sun-

light. Miz Lucretia winced. Even before they approached the cabin where Big Pearl lived with Mama Lucy and Ole Mr. Wilson, she saw Big Pearl energetically shaking out throw rugs in clouds of dust on the front porch.

Doc Redfield caught her arm. "Thought you said Big Pearl was poorly."

Miz Lucretia exhaled. "It's me what's doin' poorly, Doc Redfield, suh."

"Why didn't you jus' say so?"

" 'Cause I needed to git you away from the big house so's I could talk plain and true to you."

Doc Redfield chewed at the ends of his mustache impatiently. "Talk plain and true? 'Bout what?"

" 'Bout my beloved Masta Warren, Doc Redfield. An' that white lady what calls herself Cousin Vesta Hammond . . . That white woman is pizening Masta Warren."

He stared at her a long beat, then laughed. "You are jokin', ain't you?"

"I ain't jokin'. She tole me. She means to stay on here at Falconhurst."

He shrugged. "She a relative. A Hammond. She got every right in this world to stay at Falconhurst. An' Warren seems to need her—"

"She sho' is tryin' to make him think he needs her."

"You know how partial old Warren is to the Hammond side of the family. I always figured he felt the Theophilus Hammond side of the family was a shade better 'n the Maxwells. A step or two up the social ladder. He felt he made quite a conquest when he was able to marry into the Hammond family. It's plain to me, Miss Vesta and her husband are most welcome guests here."

Miz Lucretia Borgia felt something sink in her stomach. She felt helpless, and yet she persisted. "Relative or not, that white woman means to kill Masta Warren."

"You ought to have better sense than to make such charges against a white person—without any proof. You well know that even if you got proof—a nigger's word ain't no good in a court of law against a white person."

"Tha's why I come to you."

He shook his head. "My God. Don't git me in on it. I got woes enough tryin' to please the Widder Johnson. Don't want to hear nothin' from a black about a white lady trying to kill her relative."

Miz Lucretia stared at him, almost frantic. "It true," she said. "Please listen to me, Doc. You my only chance in this heah world to do somethin' for Masta Warren. Please listen to me."

He shook his head in frustration. "Oh, I'll listen to you. . . . You crazy enough to say things 'bout a white lady—a Hammond white lady—I crazy enough to listen. But I got to warn you. . . . You ought to stop right now, Lucretia Borgia, 'fore you say too much."

"She tryin' to kill him."

"Why? Why would she do that? She can jes' stay on here and live like a queen, long as it pleases her."

"Maybe that ain't what she want. She think Masta Ham gone forever in the Texies—"

"He may be. That boy flighty and headstrong and sp'iled. He a rich man's son. He got jus' one responsibility—to hisself. . . . He do what he want to do. . . . If'n he find somethin' in the Texies, likely he won't nevah come back."

"She think with Masta Ham lost in the Texies, an' nobody able to find him or git word to him, if somethin' happen to Masta Warren—then she gonna inherit Falconhurst."

Doc slapped his leg, laughing. "I swear you got it all figured out, haven't you?"

"I know what she say. I know how she act. I know she got poison hid away—"

"A nice, gentle, fragile lady like Miss Vesta?" He stared at her, and he was no longer smiling.

"She 'bout as fragile as a iceberg." Miz Lucretia Borgia shivered. She had gone too far, but there was no way to stop now, no way to turn back. She could only plod forward.

"I don't think you ought to say no more, Lucretia

Borgia." Doc's voice was chilled, warning running like a steel rod through it. "I yo' friend. But you countin' too much on friendship."

"You also Masta Warren's friend."

"Stop it, Lucretia Borgia. You git in big trouble, you don't quit talkin' like this. Big trouble. Even if it was true—and you had proof—you can't testify against a white woman—you can only make trouble for yo'self."

"I know I helpless. That's why I came to you—soon as I found the packet of pizen hid away in her closet."

Doc Redfield had turned away in the brilliant sunlight, squinting, aware of the Negroes gathered in the shade of chinaberry trees and porch overhangs, staring at them. A horsefly buzzed about his face. He brushed it away. At her words he turned back. "You found poison? Let me see it."

Miz Lucretia's shoulders sagged round. "I didn't bring it."

"Why not?"

"I scairt she see I moved it. I knowed I had to talk to you first."

"Without any proof at all? Why, I'd have to have a lot more proof than your wild talkin' and groundless suspicions—"

"Ain't groundless—"

"—against a genteel white lady like Miss Vesta."

Lucretia Borgia laughed, a flat, anguished sound. "She got you fooled too."

He shook his head. He reached out and touched her shoulder in an almost kindly way. He waited until she lifted her gaze and met his eyes. But he did not smile. "You got to know how serious it is, Lucretia Borgia. A black woman sayin' these baseless things against a white lady—a Maxwell relative—a Hammond lady, for God's sake."

"I found the pizen. A packet of pizen."

"Jesus Christ. You an expert on pizens now? How you know it was pizen?"

"I looked at it. Black and powdery. Hid away. An' I tasted it. Bitter and twisty on the tongue."

"Christ, gal. That could be anything. A sleeping potion. Lots of ladies carry belladonna against the vapors. I'd have to see it and test it afore I could believe it was poison—then I'd have to know what reason Miss Vesta might have for carryin' it—that had nothin' to do with your wild charges."

"She is got you fooled."

"I don't think I'm fooled, Lucretia Borgia. I think you're a fool. For jumping to conclusions. For pokin' 'round in a white lady's belongin's. An' most of all, for makin' wild charges against a white lady—that you cain't no way substantiate. You askin' fo' trouble. Now. You go back up to the big house. You make up your mind you gone behave yo'self. You take a spoonful of laudanum, and you rest, and you put this nonsense out of your burr head—for your own good."

XVI

In spite of the terrifying sensation of dismal failure and the enmity rather than compassion she'd aroused in Doc Redfield, Miz Lucretia Borgia walked back beside the silent veterinarian to the manor house. More than ever now, she felt as if she walked on explosives. She even cursed herself inwardly, wondering why she had believed she could trust the white doctor. She sighed, hating him and herself equally. She had realized his skin was white and that he was no more trustworthy than any other white person unless there was some profit in it for them. Still, she believed she had built up a credit account with Maxwell's old friend over the years; she had supplied him bedwenches when she hated his asking and the girls fought against going into his bed. She had somehow naively believed he must have understood how much he owed her. Obviously, whatever she'd done for him, he accepted only as his due because he was a white man.

Mem was waiting for them. He stood at the veranda door, dancing from one foot to the other. "Dinner ready," he said. "Much longer an' it be sp'iled. Then what I say?"

"Good," Doc Redfield said. "Announce dinner, Mem. I'm hungry enough to eat a horse."

Miz Lucretia Borgia said nothing. She followed the two men into the front foyer, where she watched Mem mince to the parlor door and stand there clearing his throat until Master Warren glanced up and gave him permission to speak by saying, "Yes, Mem. Yes, you no-good ducky. What is it now?"

"Dinner served, Master and ladies," Mem said.

There was a polite if onrushing stampede from the parlor to the dining room. Miz Lucretia Borgia allowed the white people to straggle past her as if they were abandoning a doomed ship. She sighed heavily and walked out into the kitchen as if on some important mission, but all she wanted was to escape long enough to gather her thoughts, to try to determine some new course to pursue now that what had seemed her only hope had failed and evaporated. It had done more than that. It had blown up in her face. Doc Redfield had not even suggested that she get the powder hidden in Vesta's closet and bring it to him for analysis. He wanted no part of it, even if his old friend's life was endangered. She felt more alone, more threatened than ever.

From the kitchen, where she stood, leaning on her arm on the bare table, she listened to Mr. Bower Ledbetter leading the interminable prayer, and finally to Miss Vesta taking up the bits of broken conversation and politely putting them back together around her table, her voice prim and prissy and counterfeit.

Miz Lucretia shivered visibly, as if she were chilled in the overheated kitchen. There was no doubt about it; not only was she in trouble, but her absolute authority, her long reign here at Falconhurst, was endangered. She looked about, forlorn. She had worked hard for her place in life. It had not been handed to her, but respect had been brought to her over the years, respect she'd earned.

Except for that one brutal period when the Maxwell men had sold her off to Mr. Roche of New Orleans, she had ruled supreme here. They had missed her bitterly while she was away; she had found the place nearly a

shambles upon her return. And though neither Ham nor his father ever voiced the least contrition in letting her go, they made small effort to return her to Roche, who remained, under the law, her rightful owner. She saw in a hundred ways how they regretted their thoughtless actions in parting with her. They assured her, if not in words, then in small, reluctant deeds, that it would never happen again.

She glanced about the kitchen as if it were some alien place. She'd believed herself secure here now, even though she'd known neither of the Maxwell men was moved by any concern for her feelings. As far as they were concerned, blacks were animals incapable of emotions experienced by white people. The Maxwells had needed her; they had found out while she was gone how evilly they fared without her. Her return had entrenched her more strongly than ever, but now she felt as if the very flooring beneath her feet were eroding from under her.

Falconhurst had become an entirely new place for Miz Lucretia Borgia since that Miss Vesta Hammond had arrived. Lucretia no longer held that old supreme self-confidence; she was unsure of herself, afraid of shadows, living with a terrible sense of wrong that never released her for an instant, day or night, and that had increased fearfully since her talk with the vet.

She had tried to tell him the truth—what she believed to be true—and he refused to listen. Doc had advised her to take a spoonful of laudanum and to rest. She ignored his prescription. She did not want her thought processes impeded or slowed. She felt low enough already.

At her first opportunity she stepped into the liquor closet and closed the door behind her. She found a tumbler and wiped it out with her apron. She poured the glass half full of corn whiskey. Standing in the shadowed room with her legs braced apart and holding her breath, she put her head back and drank it down. . . .

* * *

By two o'clock that afternoon, within an hour after the dinner ended, a quiet set in over the plantation. The blacks who were never worked very hard anyhow, more for exercise than any profit, were brought in out of the sun and allowed a long siesta. The guests departed as soon as they could gracefully leave after eating; most had many miles to go before dark.

Mem called Miz Lucretia Borgia. Unwillingly, she emerged from the liquor closet and helped him support Master Warren from the dining table to his parlor rocking chair. Then she tried to leave, but Warren spoke to her pettishly. "What you doin' with yo'self, Lucretia Borgia? Ain't seed you 'round all mornin'. You jes' stay close by in case I need something."

"Why, we're all here to help you with anything you need, dear Cousin Warren," Vesta said, squeezing his ruddy hand in her fingers.

"I know. I know," he said. "But Lucretia Borgia, she know where everything at. Anyway, I likes to keep her where I can watch her. Don't know the devilment she can git into when I ain't watchin' her."

"You don't indeed," Doc Redfield said, laughing. Miz Lucretia Borgia tensed, feeling as if her heart slipped its moorings. But no one picked up on what the vet had said, and after a moment Doc shrugged and added, "Want to congratulate you on your recovery, Warren. Looks like you 'bout well enough I can git on back home to the widder."

"No rush," Warren said. "No rush in this world."

"Got a lot of medical practice to look after," Doc said. But he sank into a chair and yawned deeply.

"Soon as I gits my voice back, I good as new," Warren said.

"That's your throat muscles, all burnt raw from whatever ailed you," Doc said. He glanced up at Lucretia Borgia and added, "Doubt it was any poisonin', though."

"Course it wa'n't." Warren scrubbed his misshapen hands together. "Jus' a tetch of the ague, that's all. But I do appreciate all you done for me, Doc."

"You were very ill," Cousin Vesta said, her voice thick with concern. "Shouldn't you let us help you up to bed for a nap? Shouldn't he rest, Dr. Redfield?"

"Tha's up to him," Doc said, shrugging.

Warren shook his head. "No. Cain't go up to bed in the middle of the day. Rather stay down here, where I can visit with my dear cousin Vesta . . . an' her husband, Bower, o' course."

"O' course." Redfield laughed, teasing his friend. "I swear I never seen you so taken with any lady as you are with your cousin Vesta."

"Why, Doctor," Vesta said. "You'll just make me blush."

"Well, I surely glad to have Miss Vesta here at Falconhurst," Warren said. "An' Cousin Bower, o' course."

Redfield laughed again. "You is made quite a conquest, Miss Vesta."

"Well, Bower and I certainly love our dear cousin Warren," Vesta said. "We of the family have to stick close together. There are not too many of us left anymore."

"Amen," Warren said. He cleared his throat and shook his head. "That's what make it so good to have you—an' Cousin Bower—with me."

"You can just count on us to stay as long as you like," Vesta said. "As long as you need us. That comes first with us, doesn't it, Bower dear?"

"It certainly does, my dear." Bower sat forward in his chair, nodding, faintly astonished to find himself for one brief instant the center of attention. "Of course, I have important business interests back home in Alexandria, Louisiana. But luckily, I have brilliant people working for me. The business can run along for a while without me."

"And even if it couldn't," Cousin Vesta said, "we wouldn't desert you in your need, dearest Cousin Warren."

She squeezed his hand, and the aging man clung to it

as if it were the straw that would support and succor him.

Redfield opened his eyes and gazed at them a moment and then glanced up at Lucretia Borgia. "Think maybe you has made somebody jealous 'round here, Miss Vesta."

"Oh?" She looked up, her smile dazzling. "And who might that be, Doctor?"

"Well, I jus' better tell you, Miss Vesta, they's a black lady on these here premises what thinks you is jus' trying to take over this here farm."

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's right. She thinks you here to take this place away from your cousin Warren. . . . In fact, only this morning she told me she is certain and sure you been tryin' to pizen ole Warren."

Vesta stopped smiling. She sat forward, rigid. She withdrew her hand from Warren's. He reached for it clumsily, and then gave up, sinking back tiredly into his chair. "What kind of fool talk is this, Doc?" Warren said. "You been drinkin' too many toddies?"

Vesta sat as if she were not even breathing. Her pallid face was ashen. She stared up at Lucretia.

Lucretia remained unmoving; she felt as if she were on the way to the whips.

Doc Redfield slapped his leg, laughing, even when he realized everyone else in the parlor was silent, withdrawn, chilled, and not amused. "That's right. Lucretia Borgia thinks you put poison in ole Warren's toddies." He raged with laughter again.

No one else smiled. "When did Lucretia make such charges to you, Doc?" Warren's raspy voice crackled with tension.

Redfield smiled. "This mawnin'. Takes me down to the quarters. Serious as can be. Hell, sometimes I think that black gal believes she is human. Tole me Miss Vesta means to knock you off and take over this farm for herself." He laughed again. "And Cousin Bower, o' course."

Silence stretched taut for a long breath in the room. At last Warren spoke. "Goddamn. I git sick, Lucretia Borgia, and this here the way you act up. I lucky enough to have my own dear cousins here with me in my heart-break and desolation over the loss of my dear son, an' in my recent illness, and you doin' all you can to drive 'em away. My Gawd. My Gawd. I mad enough to sell you off, girl. I swear I is."

"Oh, hell, Warren. Hit don't mean nothin'," Redfield said. "If I'd thought it would or if I'd thought it would upset you, I'd never have said anything in this world. Nobody could of dragged it out of me."

But Warren would not be mollified. He went on staring at Miz Lucretia Borgia. "Damn you, gal, don't jes' stand there. What I gone do 'bout you? You an uppity nigger, and I puts up with that. An' now here you go, spreadin' evil 'bout my own relatives."

Miz Lucretia wanted to speak. She did not. She did not know what to say. She remained unmoving, her hands clasped, sweated beneath her apron.

Warren stared up at her, eyelids pulled down, mouth quivering. "You done been whapped befo', ain't you, gal? Damn you, Lucretia Borgia, answer me."

"Yes, suh, Masta. I been whapped."

"Well, goddamn. Ain't you learn nothin'?"

"Course she ain't learned nothin'," Redfield said. "She jus' a nigger. A thick-headed nigger. What you expect?"

Warren ignored the vet, gazing up at Lucretia Borgia, eyes wild with illness. "You gone git whapped again, Lucretia Borgia. Goddamn, I swear. Sick as I am, I gone have ole Napoleon tie you up nekkid and flay the skin off'n you . . . an' I calls in the whole farm to watch you spraddled nekkid and a-screamin'."

Miz Lucretia nodded but did not speak.

Silence stretched taut for a moment, and then Miss Vesta spoke in a gentle tone of forgiveness. "I must admit, Cousin Warren, I think a whipping is likely what the girl deserves. I think she's earned it. And perhaps it

would do her good—if anything would.” She shook her head, smiling in a sad, twisted way. “But since I am the only one harmed by her cruelty, Cousin Warren, I beg you, please. Let’s just forget all about it.”

XVII

Doc Redfield departed Falconhurst for the drive across country to Seven Mile Road a little after ten o'clock the next morning. He had arrived in the Widow Johnson's runabout with only his medical kit. The little buggy creaked under the weight of the loot heaped upon him as he left. He carried five gold eagles—equal to almost one hundred dollars and an exorbitant sum when most medical house calls were settled for a stewing hen or a silver dollar. He had two sacks of yams as well as three hams from the smokehouse and crates of vegetables. They all gathered on the front gallery to wave good-bye. The vet climbed up on the seat of his carriage and waved good-bye with his whip. "Widder'll be happy to see me," he called. "When she sees all I brung, she'll forgit all about how long I been gone."

"You give the widder my love," Maxwell called out from his rocking chair.

Doc grinned devilishly. "You give it yo' own self. Got all I can stomach to give her my own love." He gestured with the whip again and called out, "You behave yo'self now, Lucretia Borgia, and do what Miss Vesta tell you."

Miz Lucretia Borgia stood stiffly in the shadows near the screen door. She felt the faint tension as all gazes

shifted to fix upon her for a long moment. Still, she did not bother to smile or to speak. She acted almost as if the doctor had not spoken to her at all.

As far as she was concerned, Doc Redfield had already said his farewells to her, and there was nothing more for either of them to say.

That morning Doc Redfield had gotten up around dawn. He had shaved, dressed, and stalked down the rear stairwell, where Miz Lucretia was alone in the kitchen, getting things ready for the breakfast cooks. It was barely full daylight; wisps of night lay like smudges beyond the window. The fire roared in the stove and kittens played and spat in their boxes beneath it. Miz Lucretia glanced up when the vet entered the room, but she did not say anything.

"Coffee smells real good," Doc said. "Real good."

"Set down, Masta," she said in a dead flat tone. "I pour you a cup."

He sat down, grinning at her. "You sure it won't be too much bother?" When she did not reply, he said, "Tha's why I got up at six A.M., Lucretia. Wanted to talk to you. Got to be real important to git me up at six in the morning—since I married to a wealthy lady like the widdler."

She set a steaming mug of coffee before him but did not speak. He took a tentative sip at the steaming liquid, slurping loudly. "You makes mighty prime coffee."

She nodded and returned to the drainboard, where she was peeling potatoes and chopping fresh onions. "Plannin' a big breakfast, are you?"

"The usual."

"That's right. You run a mighty fine kitchen here, Lucretia. A fine house. You good at what you do."

She glanced over her shoulder at him and nodded but did not speak.

"I come down early because I wanted to say good-bye to you when wasn't nobody 'round, Lucretia. I always thought you an' me was pretty good friends.

Wouldn't want nothin' to happen to our friendship . . . I mean over a little misunderstandin' or nothin'. . . ."

He waited, but she still did not speak.

"I figure to leave here today. Got lots of things waitin' for me over at Seven Mile Road. Got to git back to it, little as I might want to go. . . . So I wanted to say good-bye to you."

"Good-bye, Masta."

He laughed. "Well, I ain't leavin' this minute, Lucretia. Ain't nobody could drive me off the place until after I took out and et one of your fine breakfasts. No, sir. I ain't about to leave here and go home to what Widder Johnson might have cooked up. That woman. In fifty years she ain't learnt to fry an egg without it's tough as shoe leather."

Lucretia Borgia nodded and continued to peel potatoes. She did not speak. "You don't make it real easy for a man, do you, Lucretia?"

"What's that, Masta?"

"Well, like I say. I always figure you and me pretty good friends. I know you upset with me, an' I sorry 'bout that."

"Upset, Masta?"

He laughed. "Come on now, Lucretia. Admit it. You mad with me. Ain't you?"

"No, suh. I jus' a niggah. I don't git mad at white folks."

He laughed again. "Oh, yes, you do. You didn't send me a bedwench last night, did you?"

"No, Masta."

"Really kinda upset with me, ain't you?"

She glanced over her shoulder again. She tried to figure what it was the veterinarian wanted from her this morning. He always had bantered with her, treating her almost as an equal, but now she knew how condescending and phony this had been. She knew what he thought of her. She also knew what she thought of him.

"I jes' wanted you to know, Lucretia. No matter what you think, I admire you. I do. You needed 'round here."

Bad needed. Ole Warren, he need you even more than he knows, and one hell of a lot more than he will ever admit."

"Thank you, Masta."

"But you got to be careful. You got to learn to keep your nose clean. Stay out of white folks' affairs."

She sighed. "Yes, Masta."

"Whatevah happens from your meddlin', it cain't do no good. For nobody. Cain't no way help you, but it can git your tail in a sling."

A taut silence hung in the room. He finished off his coffee. Without apparently turning or looking at him, she refilled his cup and returned to her work.

"Why, thank you, Lucretia."

She shrugged. After a moment he said, "Want you to promise me, Lucretia Borgia. Anything goes wrong with Ole Warren, you send fo' me."

She turned and leaned against the drainboard, her bulbous arms folded across her magnificent bosom. She stared at the doctor without blinking. His face flushed slightly and he dipped his head, sipping at the steaming coffee.

"You jus' send for me," he said again without looking up.

"Why, Masta? If it be jus' the ague what ails Masta Warren, ain't no earthly sense in troublin' you way over to Seven Mile Road. . . . If it be jus' the ague, the masta git right over it, fast, won't he?"

When the doctor departed the kitchen and Lucretia Borgia was left alone again, she drove her knife furiously into her cutting board and stood gazing through the window at the wakening day beyond it. Her black eyes brimmed with tears, but they were tears of rage and not self-pity.

In a way, as much as she detested the doctor and how he had betrayed her, she appreciated his concern for her. She understood much more of his warning than he had put in words. Whether he was worried for her safety

or for the welfare of his old friend Master Warren if she were no longer at Falconhurst, his solicitude was genuine.

She remained unmoving, staring into the barnyard but seeing none of it. The doctor had cautioned her. She could remain silent no matter what she saw. If she followed this course, she could get along, in a kind of armed truce at least, with Miss Vesta. No matter what else, she would be here to look after things as much as she could under those conditions. Too, she would escape the rage of Master Warren, a fiery violence that could set him off, push him to do unreasonable things that he might later regret but could never undo. It would be a new way of existing for her, but at least she would stay out of trouble.

She did not know if she could creep through life, meek and mild and submissive. And if she did and something happened to Falconhurst, what then? As Bower Ledbetter repeated each night in his lengthy vesper prayers, "The Lord is my shepherd." She sighed. The Lord was her shepherd, too, but she liked to keep an eye out for wolves herself, and she wanted her own rod and staff when she lay down in green pastures beside still waters. Trusting in God was one thing, but trusting in Miss Vesta Hammond was something else entirely.

She did not know if she could do that.

If she didn't trust Miss Vesta—and she didn't—what then? The only other route open to her was to face Miss Vesta with two truths—one, that she had not been deceived by Cousin Vesta's genteel forgiveness when Doc Redfield exposed her confidences, and two, that she had found the packet of poison. There was no way for her to win in such a confrontation; there was no way to know what Miss Vesta would say about her to Master Warren. That way led only to deeper trouble, and no possible solution to her woes or Falconhurst's dilemma.

She clenched her fists at her sides. There remained in her mind only one alternative. She had to protect herself. She did not have to look very far down the road to see the approaching clash between her and Miss Vesta.

If she could do no more than protest, as she had with Doc Redfield, she would be helpless indeed.

She remembered the packet of powder she had found up in Miss Vesta's closet. If she had this cache in her possession, it would be like armor against attack. If she had the proof she had found in Miss Vesta's room, she could keep it, even if she never used it. When Miss Vesta found it gone, the white woman would know who had it.

This was the only way in the world Lucretia Borgia could see to hold the white woman in check.

When she and Mem helped Master Warren back into the parlor from the veranda, where he'd remained until Doc Redfield disappeared on the Benson trace, Lucretia Borgia waited only until Maxwell was comfortable, and then she withdrew, moving unobtrusively as was possible for her, from the room.

Maxwell's voice, rasping, stopped her.

"Lucretia Borgia!" His voice was like a snubbing rope, stopping her in her tracks. "Where the devil you off to in such a almighty rush?"

She turned, smiling obsequiously. "Got lots of chores to do this mawnin', Masta."

He laughed. "Don't lie to me and these good people." He jerked his head toward Miss Vesta and her quiet husband. "You sneakin' off to the tack room and some randy stud, ain't you?"

She spread her hands and shook her head. "What you wish from me, Masta?"

"Why in hell I got to wish anything from you? Want you 'round where I can find you." He jerked his head around. "You, Mem, you git in the kitchen and fix toddies for the three of us. As for you, Lucretia Borgia, you jes' stand right here by my chair until I says you can go."

"Of course, Masta." She returned to his chair and stood just behind it, her hands folded under her fresh apron.

"How are things comin' on 'round here, Lucretia?" Warren said. "I ain't had no word from you in more'n a week. I gits sick and things jus' go to the dogs. Is the niggers workin'?"

Miz Lucretia sighed. She spoke quietly. "Pole's got a crew of young boys with axes and drays clearin' trees in the west wood lot. Pole say we ought to git lumber enough for all winter—fo' the big house and fo' the slaves. An' they jus' thinnin', Pole say."

Warren nodded. "That's good. Get in a supply of firewood, and git them randy black boys some exercise, so they ain't crawlin' everything in sight. One thing they can't understand, I don't want no field bozal crawlin' some light-skinned Hausa gal. Them pretty ones is the ones look best to them bush niggers. You got to watch 'em all the time."

"Grabbing the nearest woman is part of their ethnic heritage," Bower suggested. "That's the way they lived in the bush—climbing their women and killing their enemies."

"Most natural thing in the world for 'em," Maxwell agreed. "They see a woman or smell her musk, or whatever happens, and they randy and waitin'. An' rile a nigger up an' he reverts to the bush, he's a-killin' that fast—and tomorry it's all gone out of his mind."

"They're like children," Bower said.

"More like animals," Maxwell said. "Children you can reason with. But a nigger. You can tell him something a hundred times. An' the next thing you know, it's like you ain't said nothin'—an' they don't know they done anything wrong. They jes' animals. Animals what can talk." He smiled and returned his attention to Lucretia. "Go on, gal. What else needs tellin'?"

"Things about as usual, Masta," Miz Lucretia said. "Had a few birthin's. No problems, easy as skinnin' a saplin', every one of them. Got some real beauties. Light-skinned an' sturdy."

"You know, that funny," Maxwell said to Miss Vesta. "Folks what buy slaves from Falconhurst set store and

pay extry for light-skinned Negroes. Me, I like the black. More natural. More pure-blooded. But it ain't what I think is best—it's what I've found out will sell best."

"You certainly are the most knowledgeable man I've ever met on the subject of blacks and black bloodlines," Miss Vesta said admiringly.

"My life," he said. "Been my life. An' you spend yo' life doin' one thing, pretty soon you begin to pick up the tricks of the trade. . . . Can't fool me much on a black."

At this moment Mem returned from the kitchen, carrying a tray of tall glasses filled with steaming toddies. As he handed them around, Lucretia Borgia seized the opportunity to excuse herself. When Maxwell made no further effort to detain her, she hurried from the room and along the rear hallway.

She entered the kitchen. It seemed to her that half a dozen querulous voices snagged at her, clamoring for her attention, each with urgent problems.

She ignored them all, waving her arm in a downward gesture of dismissal. She went up the rear stairwell, climbing the steps swiftly. Though she was a colossal woman, she moved lightly on her feet, like a ballet dancer. She was not even winded when she came out on the second floor hallway.

Thankfully, she saw that the cleaning girls were gathered, like chattering sparrows, in Miss Vesta's bedroom next door to Master Warren's. She felt this to be a favorable omen; maybe things were going her way at last.

She walked in and found the young house girls hard at work but talking as swiftly as they labored and concentrating mostly on their conversations. She listened to them a moment and then, as if to allay the least suspicion among the lowliest maid, she walked about the room, checking their progress.

At the closet she opened the door. Her heart thundered. Thank God it would take less than a minute to find the packet of powder, to conceal it and step away from this area.

She knelt, pushing the dark shirts on hangers out of the way, looking for the carpetbag. At first she did not see it, and her heart sank and her breath burned hot in her throat. The carpetbag had been moved.

Sweat peppered in marbles under her red bandanna and streaked from her hair across her forehead. Despite all her caution, Vesta must have somehow discovered that Lucretia had searched her belongings.

Sighing, she saw the bag in the rear corner of the closet. She pulled it to her and loosened the buckle, spreading it open. Being as careful as she could, her hands trembling, she moved every article of clothing, every object in the bag, replacing them precisely. She repeated the operation, forcing herself to take her time, to be extremely careful.

It was no good. The packet she had found here in this carpetbag was no longer there. It was gone.

Frantic, her head spinning slightly, she burrowed through the bag one more time.

Gradually, she became aware of an unusual silence. The chattering maids behind her were no longer speaking.

Then she heard a whisper of sound, the rustle of a silk undergarment. Gasping, she turned, peering helplessly over her shoulder.

Vesta stood above her, silently staring down at her. She had no idea how long the white woman had been there.

XVIII

The floor felt as if it were buckling under her and Miz Lucretia Borgia could almost believe she was suffering a nightmare, but then she realized that even a terrifying dream would be too easy. Even bad dreams ended. She saw no end for the hatred that crackled between her and Miss Vesta.

Lucretia closed the bag, locked it, and shoved it back into the dark closet. Then she slowly stood up to face the white woman.

She waited for Cousin Vesta to go to pieces, to fly into hysterics. Hysterics were a way of life with southern genteel ladies, and this time Vesta's rage was justified: the black woman had been caught in the act of rummaging through the guest's baggage. Lucretia Borgia braced herself for the storm. She could not see Vesta Hammond missing an opportunity to further discredit and undermine her.

It was a time for a tantrum or a time for deadly quiet. Vesta was calm; she stood very calmly, as cool and pale and unreal as a funeral lily.

Only in Vesta's almond-shaped black eyes did the savage rage swirl and glitter, with madness showing through. It was as if the passions were tamped down in her, barely controlled. But for a long time Vesta did not

move at all; she didn't blink, and she didn't take her gaze from Lucretia's face. Her body was taut, in an almost trancelike rigidity.

But when Vesta spoke, her modulated voice was totally controlled, without even a quiver of emotion revealed in it. Her tone was icy and yet almost conversational.

"May I ask what you are doing?" Vesta said.

Lucretia Borgia did not speak. There was nothing to say, and she did not trust her voice. Instinct warned her that any sign of weakness or guilt just now would be fatal. And God knew she was guilty as hell . . . unless, as she believed, the ends justified the means.

Miss Vesta waited and when the servant-for-life did not reply, she spoke again in that icy voice. "What do you think Master Warren would say if I told him I had caught you rummaging through *my* carpetbag?"

Lucretia Borgia exhaled heavily. She could not go on refusing to speak. This was an admission of guilt and weakness too. She shook her head but kept her own voice level. "Don't know, ma'am . . . Depends, I reckon, on if'n he believe me when I say what I looking for."

Miss Vesta's only movement was the sharp intake of breath. The sound was loud in the tautly silent room. The cleaning girls stood as if holding some kind of tableau of terror. They seemed not even to breathe. Their round white-rimmed eyes were fixed on Lucretia Borgia and the white mistress. To each of them, Miz Lucretia Borgia was second only to the master of Falconhurst, and many of them feared her power and retribution more. But the slender white woman was an unknown quantity to them. They knew only from instinct that the way Miss Vesta regarded Lucretia Borgia along her nose bespoke contempt and condescension.

"Are you through in my closet?" Vesta inquired in serrated irony.

"Yes'm."

Vesta retreated a step. "Then you will close that door, please."

"Yes'm." Lucretia Borgia obeyed the order and remained standing against the facing, somewhat as if she stood before a firing squad. She waited, but Vesta did not ask her *what* she'd been looking for in that carpetbag.

Miz Lucretia Borgia waited, holding her breath, willing Vesta to ask that question. She wanted to say the words *packet* and *powder*. She wanted those words in the open between them. She wanted to admit that soon after Master Warren had fallen ill she had found a packet of bitter-tasting powder in that carpetbag but that when she returned, it was gone. Those things needed to be said.

But she also saw at that moment that Miss Vesta was a brilliant and cunning foe. Miss Vesta was not about to place herself in any untenable position either. She had the servant on the defensive, where she wanted her, and she meant to keep her there.

"Then you are through in here?" Vesta inquired.

"Yes'm. I reckon we through."

"I don't mean the girls. I mean you. Are you through in here?"

Lucretia winced faintly. "Yes'm. I is."

"How nice. Then you may leave my room. . . . We'll say no more about this little incident for now, Lucretia Borgia. But I don't want you to think you have gotten away with anything with me. You'll find I won't forget this."

"Yes'm. I don't 'spects you will."

"Then you had better think it over carefully—if you have the ability to think at all. . . . When I tell Cousin Warren about what I caught you doing in here, he is going to believe what I tell him—whatever I tell him."

Lucretia Borgia exhaled heavily and spread her hands. She nodded, conceding this point. "Yes'm . . . you white . . . you kinfolks. . . . Likely the masta believe you, no matter what."

"Then remember that. Remember it well before you attempt anything like this again." She stared at Lucretia

Borgia, her strange eyes glittering. "Do you understand me, you black slut?"

The controlled savagery was like a fierce, stinging slap across the eyes, but Lucretia Borgia betrayed no weakness. She had trained herself long before: Nothing any white person could say to her could ever penetrate her skin.

She simply nodded. "I remember, ma'am." Then she could not resist adding, "It just that even if the masta believe you—and doubt me—an' we both know that what goin' to happen—what I say might do jes' one thing you wouldn't want."

"Yes?"

"Yes'm. Hit might jes' git him to thinkin' . . . no matter who or what he believe."

Vesta inhaled sharply, barely managing to control her rage. "Get out of my room. This instant . . ."

Falconhurst became an entirely new place, a kind of waiting purgatory, for Miz Lucretia Borgia after her confrontation with Miss Vesta in that upstairs bedroom.

For almost the first time Lucretia Borgia was forced to face the unsubstantial insecurity of her place as overseer of the farm. Because of her position, not one of the blacks nor accepted by the white people, she had had few friends; suddenly it struck her that now she had none.

And yet, despite the tensions that crackled through the manor house, the atmosphere charged as if before a fearful storm, Master Warren seemed unaware of anything amiss. He no longer bewailed the loss of his beloved son. He bathed, dressed, and shaved every morning. Gradually, he regained his strength and some of his old lost vigor. He continued to regale Vesta and her husband with stories of his adventures and monetary triumphs in the slave trade, his life with Cousin Sophie before her tragic and premature demise, his hopes for his son. The only sign that he was less than recovered came each

afternoon when he began to nod and yawn in his chair, his energies totally spent.

Bower Ledbetter, too, seemed entirely oblivious to the enmity vibrant between Vesta and the servant woman. Lucretia Borgia could not understand this at all. It made no sense that Miss Vesta had not reported the entire business to her husband. It was far more likely that Bower Ledbetter was pale and lethargic, doughy and unreal. Perhaps he was incapable of strong passions, content to wander through the shadows of his existence with Vesta. He appeared too weak to take a stand on any issue, even the matter of a fortune in money, in property, or life and death.

In those next days Miz Lucretia Borgia remained busy with the tasks of running the big house and the entire plantation itself. She not only was in charge of all the women, their births and ills and female problems, but she checked on their chores in their own cabins, to see they were carried out so that the blood in them remained healthy and strong. She oversaw the spinning and weaving of cloth, the sewing of shirts and shifts and trousers for the men. Everything demanded her attention—the dairy, the killing and curing of the hogs, the daily rations for each of the slave cabins. She settled their quarrels and their fights. She kept order. She found work for the young men to do, anything to keep them busy and their muscles exercised and supple. But even doing all this, she was haunted by the conflict with Vesta, waiting for Master Warren to shout her name in rage, for the evil to spill out and engulf her.

She watched Miss Vesta narrowly, growing daily more amazed by the way the woman behaved as if nothing were wrong. Vesta seemed more exaggeratedly sweet and charming and attentive to Master Warren. Tautly, Lucretia Borgia waited, but there was no intimation that Miss Vesta had complained to the master about the servant woman's crime. One might be led to believe that Vesta had put the matter from her mind. But this was not true. Lucretia Borgia felt the intense burning hatred

in the woman's stare when they were alone together in a room, or met in the hallways. As it had from the first, it seemed that Vesta materialized suddenly from nowhere. This had not changed. And in subtle ways Vesta let Lucretia know she had not forgotten. She seemed content for the moment to allow the threat to hang over the servant. The day of reckoning was coming; the servant would not know when—it would be a time of Vesta's choosing.

Meantime, though she never for an instant relaxed her own vigil, Miz Lucretia could discover not the least indication that Miss Vesta wished anything but the best for her beloved cousin Warren.

In fact, it was Cousin Vesta's attentiveness and her constant and eternal vigil over Maxwell's health and welfare, down to the very temperature of his toddies, that daily exhausted the aging man.

Lucretia Borgia was in the kitchen when Mem came hurrying from the front of the house. "Masta say come," he said.

Her heart sank. Was this the way it was to be until the matter was settled between her and Vesta? "What does he want?"

"He tired. Say he want to go up to his bed for a nap. Now. Say he want you to help me. Say I ain't got sense enough to help him without you there to say."

Relieved, Miz Lucretia levered herself to her feet and went into the parlor. With Mem on one side and her on the other, they convoyed the master up the wide stairway to the second floor and into his bedroom. As Mem helped Maxwell remove his trousers, Lucretia went about opening the windows to entice any errant cool breeze from the yard trees. She pulled the shades three-quarters of the way down, putting the room in a faint, shadowy darkness.

She stood at the front window, her fingers on the shade tassel, when she heard the youthful lookouts screaming as they ran along the lane from the trace. "Company. Company a-comin'. Hit company comin'."

"Who is it now?" Maxwell said. Though visitors were a rarity at Falconhurst and warmly received, he was at the moment too tired to consider being a proper host.

Miz Lucretia Borgia peered through the window, bending over at the waist and shading her eyes with her hand. "Who is it?" she shouted down to the lookouts who gathered in the yard below her. She turned around, straightening. "'Tain't nothin' to concern you, Masta," she said. "Hit's jes' another of them triflin' nigger cuffles. Like at Masta Putney Shoa's culls. I looks 'em over, you want me to."

Maxwell lay down on the fresh sheets. He shook his head and gestured with his arm. "Send them away. Get them off the property."

He turned on his side and pulled a pillow over his head to shut out the light, the noise, the thought of visitors, the fabrication of memories, good and evil, stored in his mind, waiting for a quiet moment in which to possess and harry him.

Mem followed Miz Lucretia Borgia downstairs and out to the front gallery.

They stood together at the head of the steps at the brink of the shade, the yard blazing with sunlight before them. At the first cries of the little lookouts the slaves gathered from the quarters, the barns, the corrals, and the fields, gazing in silence as the cuffle trudged up the lane, their chains and shackles loud in the afternoon silence.

Even from the distance Miz Lucretia Borgia could see that this was a far sorrier chained caravan of slaves than even the one driven through here by Putney Shoa. At least, from that train of harried beasts had come the youth Satyr. She saw nothing of interest in this pack of shackled blacks. These beasts looked diseased, half-starved, frantic with fatigue. They were almost staggering as they faltered up the lane, prodded by a fat white man on a sweated roan horse. These straggling beings moved silently, morose and, at the distance, nauseatingly odor-

ous, a compound of the stench of human offal, of dried urine, the overpowering musk of unwashed bodies.

At the head of the lane the stragglers halted at a yell and the crack of a bullwhip from the stout white man. The heavyset drover, in a mud-stained white suit, boots, and planter's hat, plodded on his tired horse across the yard to the foot of the wide plank steps. As he rode he coiled the bullwhip and secured it to his saddlehorn. A handgun in holster bulged against his scabrous jacket, and a rifle rested in its saddle scabbard. His stout face, mustached, was ruddy and leaked sweat. As he approached, Miz Lucretia's nose wrinkled slightly. She could smell him too.

Halting the roan in the patch of sunlight at the foot of the steps, the man removed his hat; then, realizing what he had done, he mopped the sweat band with a colored bandanna and replaced the panama on his head. He said, "Yo' masta around?"

"Masta, he feelin' poorly," Mem said.

"Well, you tell him Mr. Foye Cleavenger is here and would like to talk with him, to our mutual advantage."

"Masta say he cain't be disturbed," Mem said. "He in bed."

"In the middle of the afternoon?" Foye Cleavenger removed his hat again and this time mopped his balding head with his bandanna. "Though God knows it's hot enough . . . I might be in the market to buy some blacks."

"Masta jus' ain't in the market to sell today, Masta, suh," Mem said. "I sorry. That what he say to tell you."

Miz Lucretia Borgia walked down the steps. She gave the slaver the barest of glances and walked past him. His head jerked up and he said, "Well, ain't you an uppity nigger?"

Miz Lucretia didn't bother answering him. She walked to the head of the lane while the horseman and Mem watched silently. She looked over the chained slaves. She could not recall when she had encountered a more desperate-looking lot.

She walked back to where Foye Cleavenger had shifted slightly in his saddle, staring at her. She looked up at him. "You got nothin' we'd be interested in buyin'," she said. "We got nothin' we could sell you."

"Who the hell are you?" Foye Cleavenger said.

"I Miz Lucretia Borgia," she said. She went up the steps.

"Well, Miz Lucretia Borgia, Foye Cleavenger don't deal with niggers. An' especial, he don't deal with uppity niggers—except at the end of his bullwhip."

"Tha's good, then," Miz Lucretia said over her shoulder. "'Cause we don't deal with white trash that lets they niggers bleed from shackle cuts."

"You black bitch." Cleavenger spoke to her back.

Miz Lucretia did not betray by so much as a twitch of her shoulders that she'd even heard the slaver's vituperation. She spoke coolly to Mem. "Them poor devils look hungry. Feed 'em clabber and pone and long sweetenin'. And have the boys bring 'em buckets of water."

"Well, I thank you for that much," Cleavenger said without much gratitude in his voice. He wanted them to know he was not begging, with his hat in his hand.

Miz Lucretia glanced over her shoulder at him. "We feeds and waters yo' stock," she said. "We do that for everybody what comes to Falconhurst. But you keep 'em where they is, and you keep them as far as you can from our blacks."

"All right. Thankee. I will."

Under her breath Miz Lucretia added to Mem, "And get them off the property as soon as possible."

XIX

When Miz Lucretia Borgia heard the servant girls giggling like a gaggle of guinea hens at the rear-porch entry to the kitchen, she strode among them. She stared at them threateningly until the laughter died and they scattered like a flushed covey of quail.

She stood, framed in the doorway, and squinted against the blaze of midafternoon sunlight. After a moment she saw the object of the maids' fascination. Young Satyr loitered under the chinaberry tree near the old well. He leaned against the rough bole and stared toward the back door of the house. It was almost as if he were willing an apparition to appear there.

Miz Lucretia hesitated only a moment, then she thrust the door open and stepped out on the porch. She let the screen door slam behind her, sending up a muzzing mist of flies.

She saw Satyr straighten at the tree and smile. She walked down the steps and across the yard. She wanted to be firm. Yet she could not help feeling warmth toward the handsome, smiling boy. It was she he had been hoping to glimpse, she whom he awaited out here without any hope, but unable to retreat. She was flattered, and she admitted it was especially pleasant at this low ebb of her fortunes to find there was someone who

wanted her and cared about her, and even put himself in peril simply to catch a brief sight of her. And even more, she recalled the heated way she had rolled naked with him on that cot in his cabin. Remembering, she felt the liquid warmth flood and seep down through her, seeming to char the sensitive tendrils at her thighs.

"Why you hangin' 'round this house, boy?" She peered at him in the crosshatching of leaves and sunlight.

Satyr spread his hands. "Hopin' for a sight of you, Miz Lucretia Borgia."

"Ain't they servin' up gals to please you?"

He sighed. "Been longin' fo' you, Miz Lucretia, ma'am."

She shook her head. "You git yo'self whupped."

"Fo' wantin' you?"

"It against masta's rules for black boys to loiter like this close to the manor house." But she admitted her heart had quickened.

"I know that, Miz Lucretia. . . . Pole, he done tole me."

"You ought to listen to Pole—he the one what does the whoppin'."

He nodded, but shrugged slightly. "Jes' wanted to see you . . . Cain't be no harm in jes' talkin' to you a minute."

She managed to conceal the smiling and warmth that rose up in her, but she was pleased and excited by his attention and his desiring her. Pleasure was the only thing on his mind. But then, pleasure was not all that bad. Pleasure was something unknown in her life these past weeks. Maybe life was not as bad for a boy like Satyr as it might seem at first glance. There had to be some gratification even for a slave youth who managed to find something to dream about in this evil world. And in a way, Satyr was blessed. He was young and randy and sure of himself. In that instant she wished bleakly and devoutly that she could break away from all her obligations and walk down to that cabin where Satyr lived, and put everything except his arms and his body

from her mind. She wanted in that moment nothing more than to be held close in his strong young arms, to feel secure in his embrace, to go insane when he made love to her.

Her voice caressed him gently. "What you want to talk about?"

"You, Miz Lucretia . . . I ain't seed you. . . . Been a mess of days now, and I ain't even seed you. . . . But I ain't thought 'bout nothin' else. . . . Them wenches . . . they pretty . . . an' they nice . . . but they ain't you, Miz Lucretia."

She felt her eyes burn with tears of gratification. "I've thought 'bout you too, Satyr." She shook her head. "I jus' been so busy . . . so terrible busy."

He spoke with a kind of desperation. "I git so when I think 'bout you, I don't want to do nothin' else."

"But you got to. You can't git attached to nobody. Not me. Not none of them wenches they bring you to mount and pleasure. Nobody. Not on this farm. Or nowhere else. You a slave. A black raised to sell . . . You be gone one of these days—then we don't ever see each other no more. . . . But we got to expect that. 'Cause that's the way life is."

He smiled, the self-confidence of the very young and very innocent bright in his smiling. "But I heah now. . . . You here. Can't nobody change that." He sighed and glanced around in a helpless way. He brought his gaze back to her face. "I got the cravin' for you. Fierce."

She looked around them too, the barnyard, the old house, the cuffle of slaves being watered and fed at the head of the lane, the sun glittering in Satyr's beautiful black eyes.

"I got the cravin' fo' you too, Satyr. . . . I tell you what. You go back down to the quarters. I come. Tonight. Soon's I finish with the chores in the kitchen, I come a-runnin' to see you."

He looked as if he might shout aloud in his boyish delight. "Promise?"

"I promise." She smiled, feeling excited and young in

that moment, younger even than Satyr. She touched at his bared, sweat-glistening bicep, rock-hard and swollen in the sunlight. "I promise. Now, you git along back where you belong—an' you behaves yo'self."

"Can't promise that." He put his head back, laughing. "Can't no way promise that. . . . Gone have to wring that blacksnake's head three, four times jes' thinkin' 'bout tonight an' you."

She laughed at him. "Don't you waste it all," she said. "You save some for me."

Lucretia Borgia returned to the kitchen, walking a gamut of grinning, knowing servant-girl faces. She sent them scattering with a swipe of her arm, but she felt too elated to be very angry at anyone.

She was pouring herself a cup of coffee at the stove when Mem burst into the room.

His face looked bloodless, his eyes were bleak. For a quick beat she thought he had seen her laughing with Satyr beneath the chinaberry tree and was slavering with jealousy. She was ready to backhand some sense into his burr head.

He tried to speak but made only unintelligible sounds. She caught his arms and shook him. "Settle down, Mem. What's the matter with you?"

He shook his head, his voice breathless, as if he'd run ten miles. Though he gasped for breath, it was as if he could not catch his breath at all.

"'Tain't me," he managed to say. "'Tain't me. It you, Miz Lucretia. . . . Gawd help me. That Miz Vesta . . . she done gone and sold you to that slave trader Cleavenger."

At first the words were too ridiculous to credit at all. If Mem had come running with news that the sky was falling, she could have accepted it as easily. "Sold? Me?"

He nodded, his thick underlip quivering. "To that Cleavenger."

She laughed. "What kind of fool joke is this, Mem?"

“ ‘Tain’t no joke, Lucretia. Hit the truth. That white woman, she went out on that gallery. Whilst I was feedin’ and waterin’ them blacks like you say. She invited that Mr. Cleavenger up on the porch. Big as life. Ax him to sit down. He sits in the master’s own chair. They talks fo’ a long time. Then Miz Vesta, she call me. She say, Mem, you go tell that gal Lucretia Borgia to git anything she want to take and come out to the front porch. This heah instant. But then Mr. Cleavenger say you not to bring nothin’, ‘cepting the clothes on your back. He say he got a long way to go and he travel light.”

The truth struck Miz Lucretia, enraging her. She felt no fear. There was no room for being afraid; she was too irate to be afraid of a stupid white woman and an itinerant slave peddler. Neither of them knew who she was, but they would soon know.

“I’ll go talk to that white slut,” she said.

“Yes’m.” Mem nodded his head. “I hope you will. ‘Cause they sent me to fetch you.”

“Sold me.” Lucretia Borgia’s mouth twisted with the contempt swirling deep inside her. “Why, that woman must be an ig’amus.”

“Yes’m.”

She wiped her hands on her apron, striding across the kitchen toward the dining room and the front of the house. Mem trotted in her wake.

She went along the darkened corridor, across the entry, the world a sunstruck blur beyond the veranda. She slapped the front door open and walked out, rage building in her, her face flushed to the rim of her red bandanna.

It was very quiet on the porch. Vesta sat as if presiding at a ladies’ tea, her slender hands folded in her lap. Foye Cleavenger no longer sat in Master Warren’s chair. He stood at the rim of the sunlight near the head of the steps, supporting his weight on a stout pole wrapped with baling wire with a looped noose at the end.

Mem followed and stood some feet from them, his hands at his sides.

"What kind of shit is this?" Miz Lucretia Borgia said. She stared down at Vesta, ignoring the slave trader.

"Don't you dare speak to me like that," Vesta said. She stood up slowly.

Lucretia Borgia laughed at her. "Why? What will you do, sell me to this tramp?" She jerked her head toward Foye Cleavenger.

She heard Cleavenger's gasp of indignation, but she did not take her gaze from Vesta's pale face, twisted with a faint, genteel smiling.

"I have sold you to Mr. Cleavenger," Vesta said.

Miz Lucretia could not help laughing at this ludicrous idea. "I think you is kind of weak in yo' head, Miz Vesta. You couldn't sell me no way. First, I ain't yo' slave to sell."

Vesta shrugged. "Whether you are *my* slave or not has no importance. It is certainly not a matter I'll discuss with you. The only fact important to you is that I have sold you."

"You best call Masta Warren," Lucretia said coldly. "And talks to him before you gits any wild ideas of sellin' anybody on this heah farm."

Vesta's smile was icy. "I don't believe we need to disturb Cousin Warren's nap for this."

"Whether you think so or not, that's what we goin' to do," Lucretia said. She spoke over her shoulder. "Mem, you git up them stairs and you wake up the masta."

Vesta's voice was like the gentle clawing of a cat. "You stand just where you are, Agamemnon, unless you'd like to be sold along with this black slut."

Lucretia half turned, staring at Mem. He stood helplessly. She saw in his anguished face that he wanted to obey her, but he could not force his legs to move him.

Lucretia laughed and shook her head. "The hell with you," she said. "I'll wake him myself."

"You stand where you is, black gal," Cleavenger said. "You my chattel now. Bought and paid. You go quiet, or you be subdued. That's plain up to you."

XX

Miz Lucretia Borgia wanted to scream in derisive laughter and to run at her tormentors, clawing their pasty white bodies, to rip out the evil that poisoned them. But she remained for the moment rooted to the flooring of the veranda.

She moved her gaze slowly from Cleavenger's sweated face, contorted, sun-braised, and flushed, to Vesta Hammond's exaggeratedly serene countenance. Vesta's black eyes glittered, fixed on Lucretia Borgia. Vesta stood pallid and implacable with hatred. Her strange red lips twisted in a faint and mocking smile.

Lucretia Borgia shivered. These were like unreal visages encountered in a nightmare. Even Mem, helpless, quivering between terror and tears, was like someone alien to her. She thought in a sudden flaring of bitterness, if you ever come near my cot again, you worthless toad, I'll twist off that limp nut of yours and shove it down your throat.

She shook her head, her faint laugh incredulous. "What kind of stupid joke is this?"

"It's no joke, woman." Cleavenger straightened. "I advise you to come quietly. . . . You an' me . . . we got a long way to go, an' I can make it easy on you or I can make it hell."

Lucretia Borgia stared at him. The man was serious. He actually believed this white bitch had the right and power to sell a Falconhurst black. He behaved like a man certain of himself and his rights.

Rage kindled deep inside her and flashed upward; only for the first time she felt something else, a flaring of panic. She began to be afraid, even when that didn't make sense. This whole business was just stupid enough to be real.

She met Cleavenger's sun-faded eyes levelly. "You is made a mistake listening to this woman."

"I tell you now, wench, we're going."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Mister. I don't know what this white woman has told you, but she's got no rights here, no rights in this world. Since Masta Ham is gone, I run this farm, I sell the slaves—what Masta wants me to sell. . . . This woman nothin'. . . . She some kind of distant cousin of the masta's dead wife. . . . Leastwise, she say she is. . . . Anything she say to you about this farm don't amount to a hill of beans."

Cleavenger shrugged, his tone contemptuous. "Well, I ain't arguin' with you, wench. . . . Fust place, I don't argufy with niggers. I got a bullwhip says all I got to say to fractious niggers." He removed a sheet of paper from his pocket and shook it out. "Now, here's the bill of sale." He waved the handwritten document before her eyes. "I paid five hundred dollars an'—"

"Five hundred dollars!" Lucretia Borgia burst into savage laughter. "Now I know how stupid this whole thing is. Five hundred dollars?" She jerked her head around to face Vesta. Vesta remained perfectly composed, her slender hands locked before her, eyes downcast. It wasn't that she was reluctant to meet Lucretia's gaze; she just didn't bother. Her whole attitude said the matter was closed and she was waiting only for Cleavenger to take his purchase and get off her property. Lucretia Borgia trembled, wanting to claw at that insolent face until the woman was aware of her. She gestured with her arm, frustrated. "Five hundred dollars . . . you stu-

pid white bitch. Any house nigger is worth three times that. Any house-trained nigger . . . You think this po' white tramp don't know that?"

"Watch your tongue, wench." Cleavenger was fiercely offended; his was that terrible pride of the man jealously guarding his own inner impotence. He was forever raw, quick to offense if slighted.

Lucretia Borgia ignored the trader and his threat, and this only increased his rage against her.

She stepped toward Vesta, her voice low but crackling with intensity. "House niggers. Like me. In child-bearing prime. With Hausa blood. Hausa. That's my bloodline. . . . Know it. . . . Heard it all my life. . . . Masta say I worth at least thirty-five hundred dollars . . . an' right now, on this heah farm, I worth a lot more than that."

"Not to me." Vesta spoke in a tired, offhand way, as if bored with the entire matter.

"You best call the masta," Miz Lucretia Borgia said. "Wait till Masta heah about this." She glanced about her, frustrated and trembling with rage.

"Well, I don't have to listen to any more of this," Vesta said. She glanced toward Cleavenger. "I want this crazed, arrogant black off my property. At once."

"Yes'm." Cleavenger nodded.

When he hesitated, Vesta said, "Well, do you want help shackling this woman?"

Cleavenger shook his head. "No, ma'am. I ain't yet met the nigger, male or female, I couldn't handle. They all like mules, ma'am. You hit 'em in the haid hard enough, they listen."

Vesta shrugged. She glanced once more toward Miz Lucretia Borgia, and then, tilting her head slightly, walked past her. She entered the foyer and let the screen door slam behind her.

Miz Lucretia Borgia heeled around, following her. When Cleavenger lunged toward her, she opened her mouth to shout for Master Warren. The noose of bailing

wire flicked out over her head and clasped shut on her throat.

The words were stoppered in her throat. Cleavenger yanked on the pole. The wire tightened, cutting, and she staggered backward toward him.

She fought, trying to catch her balance. She was not yet afraid of this fat white man. If she got her balance, she could demolish him with her fists, even if Mem stood impotently aside. If she could only cry out, her screams would bring Pole and Big Jem and maybe even Satyr. The older Negroes might be afraid to attack a white man, even to aid her, but she knew Satyr would not be deterred.

But she could not speak. And though she staggered and toppled about, she could not get her balance; she could not set herself on her feet at all.

Suddenly, just sucking in a breath of air through her constricted throat became more urgent than standing or calling for help. As the breath was denied her, she felt dizzy, and she clawed wildly at her throat.

From some fearful distance she heard Cleavenger's pleased laugh. This kind of cruelty enthralled him. Blacks were animals. They really were comical when they were hurt. It gratified him to hear one cry out in pain. And he meant to have this insolent bitch on her knees, begging, before he was through with her.

She felt a slackening of the wire, and she sucked in a breath of air and lunged away from Cleavenger. This was just what the slaver wanted. He let her take two steps, almost regain her balance, and then he jerked on the pole again.

Her arms flying upward, the big woman went sprawling out on her back. She struck the floor, the house itself quivering under the impact. Whatever breath she had in her was knocked out of her lungs. She clawed, gasping and struggling on the floor.

"You had enough, bitch?" From someplace far above her, through an occluding red cloud, she heard Cleaven-

ger's disembodied voice. Panting, she set herself and lunged for him.

This time Cleavenger laughed and thrust the pole past her, yanking her away from him.

"Aye, God, you're a fighter, ain't you?" Cleavenger laughed. He thrust the pole as far as possible from him and then yanked it back.

Lucretia Borgia sprawled out on the floor. She tried to dig her nails into the aged wood. She could see nothing. Her ears were throbbing, pounding with the sound of her own blood in her temples.

She rolled over, trying to get her fingers under the wire. She could not do it. Cleavenger yanked on his pole and the wire cut deeper into her flesh.

"All right, bitch, I think we're ready to go now." Cleavenger turned, set himself, and braced the pole against his shoulder. He plodded down the steps, dragging Lucretia Borgia after him.

Her face struck the top step, smashing the bridge of her nose. She felt the sting and saltiness of her blood.

She grasped with clawing fingers at the plank steps, trying to break her fall, to anchor herself against that man and his pole. Cleavenger reached the ground and turned, watching her. As her fingers closed on the plank, he yanked again, and she rolled, bumping down the steps. She felt her bandanna scraped off her head, and with it the skin from her cheek.

She struck the ground, face-first. She lay there trying to get a breath of air through her slashed throat. The wire had cut her now, and she bled profusely. Blood leaked from her nose and her cheeks, matted with dirt.

Cleavenger stared at her a moment, then he lifted his leg, shoved his boot into his stirrup, and mounted his waiting horse.

"You want to get up an' walk?"

For answer, the black woman lunged around and embraced the lower step in both her arms, claspings her arms to secure herself.

Distantly, she heard Cleavenger's laughter. Then he

turned the horse, braced his pole, and plodded toward the head of the lane. At first, Lucretia thought he was going to cut her head off. She reckoned he would have, except as her breath was stoppered, her flesh sliced by the closing wire, she released the steps and went bouncing and twisting across the ground.

She reached forward, trying to catch the wire to release some of the slicing pressure on her throat.

Cleavenger booted his horse, moving him faster. The wire tightened; Lucretia Borgia opened her mouth to gasp for air. Her lips tore against the hard-packed earth; dirt clogged against her teeth and tongue.

She felt her nostrils impacted with sand. She was aware that the horse was almost trotting now, and she could hear Cleavenger's triumphant laughter. Then her mind wheeled. She could no longer breathe, and she went plunging out into a cool, soft, and gentle darkness. . . .

When she woke up, a black woman was kneeling over her, washing her face with a doused cloth. As she opened her eyes the woman nodded and then Lucretia saw Cleavenger, on horseback, between her and the sun.

"Wash her mouth out," Cleavenger ordered. "Then we ready to travel."

Lucretia took a long swig of well water and washed out her mouth, spitting the dirt and liquid toward Cleavenger's boots. She heard his laughter as if from someplace removed from reality.

"Yeah. She's all right now," Cleavenger said. "Git her on her feet. If she ain't willing to move, they's the wire loop to convince her I mean business."

A shackled man and woman assisted Lucretia to her feet. Instinctively, she touched at her head. Her bandanna was gone. She felt far more than half-naked without it.

Cleavenger cracked his whip only inches above her head. She did not even flinch. She would not give him that satisfaction. She heard him laugh again, a taunting sound. "All right, you niggers. Head out."

Lucretia took a step, staggered, and nearly fell. The shackle about her ankle was rusted metal, smeared and discolored with blood of chattel who'd worn them ahead of her.

She caught her balance and managed to walk, dragging her shackled foot behind her.

Cleavenger taunted her over his shoulder. "You'll git the hang of it. Two or three days, you'll walk good as any these other niggers."

Lucretia Borgia touched at her broken and bleeding lips with the backs of her fingers. "God help you when Masta catch up with you."

Cleavenger laughed, enjoying himself. "You never stop fightin', do you? Well, I'll soon have you meek as airy sick puppy, woman. . . . An' as fo' yo' mastah, I yo' mastah now. An' I got the bill o' sale to prove it."

Lucretia Borgia shivered, staggering along the lane. As the coffle reached the gate and turned west on the Benson trace, she looked back, wild with panic, toward the manor house.

The last thing she saw was Mem, standing as if rooted to the floor, on the shadowed veranda.

Cleavenger kept them walking. Lucretia Borgia slowed their progress, because unless she dragged her foot, she staggered and fell. Some of the other blacks laughed at her.

On her knees, she looked up at them. Every one of them looked ill with some disabling disease or malformity. She had seen every grade of slave caravan pass Falconhurst, but she had never seen one composed of such wretched beings. Their ankles were deeply cut, crusted in places with scabs, still bleeding, or freshly minced in others, but by now they were inured to this pain. They no longer even reacted to the sting of the flies that matted their sores.

She shuddered. She felt as if she had gone from nightmare into the bowels of purgatory. The woman beside

her gave her a toothless grin, and Lucretia withdrew involuntarily, repelled.

"You be all right, honey," the toothless crone said. "Nice an' plump, like you is, the masta likely let you sleep on his blanket with him come nightfall."

Lucretia Borgia bit back the bile that gorged up into her throat. She stared at the broad back of the horseman at the head of the sorry pack. Even the horse he rode seemed spavined, neglected, and ready to drop from fatigue and malnutrition. Only the rider was fat and well-fed. She saw they carried few supplies, some saddlebags tied over a plodding jackass, and that was all. Obviously, Cleavenger fed his chattel off the land, where and when he could. Likely, he depended on the generosity of farmholders as much as anything, people who would be glad to hand out food in order to get the scabrous caravan off their property.

Soon, fatigued, her foot and ankle burning as if charred by hot coals, she lost interest in the derelicts around her and plodded forward, dragging her leg and staring at the ground ahead of her.

Frequently, Cleavenger turned his horse and rode it back alongside his train. He shouted at them as if they were cattle. "Ho! Move it up there. Ho! You fall, nigger, and we bury you where you fall."

She saw that he kept cracking his bullwhip to prod them forward. At first she cringed when the tip of the lash snapped within inches of her face. But she saw that Cleavenger got his amusement watching them react to the threat of the whip. He intentionally just missed them. Sensing this, she lowered her head and did not look up again, no matter how closely he cracked the leather fringes.

"Move," he shouted. "We got us a long way to go. . . . Hit's a long ways to the cane fields of the delta . . . an' that's where you dregs are headed . . . keep walkin' . . ."

They trudged past familiar farmhouses and the plowed open fields of the neighboring farms along the narrow

trace, but Lucretia Borgia no longer believed there was any help for her on this earth. She did not even look up. In her mind she looked back to Falconhurst.

Falconhurst! So many years, so many memories. The good and the bad and the grievous and the triumphant. So much had happened there since the day Master had brought her home, a young girl bought at auction. . . . Well, it was home no more, and it had not been since that Hammond woman arrived. Thinking about Vesta Hammond, Lucretia Borgia felt her heart slip its moorings. She had existed in limbo since Vesta's arrival, waiting for something to happen to deliver her and her beloved Falconhurst from that creature's grasping talons. But she had never believed it would end like this, so cruelly and abruptly and finally.

She heard a faint thundering, which grew louder in the silent afternoon. She looked up and saw the metal girders of a bridge and the approaches to the torrentlike river. She shivered, feeling somehow that crossing this river was a kind of symbol—the end of her life at Falconhurst.

They crossed the wooden bridge over the Tombigbee, the hoofbeats of Cleavenger's horse rattling on the aged, petrified plankings. Once they were across the river she could no longer bear to look back over her shoulder. An ache spread in her throat, and the pain would not abate. She felt as if she were going to cry out hysterically. She bit down hard on her torn underlip to keep from sobbing aloud. This was evil she could not endure. Her life was over. She was a strong, brilliant, and prideful woman, and they had stripped everything from her, even the red bandanna, without which no one ever glimpsed her in public. They had taken everything. If they forced her forward another step, her very reason for living would end.

Suddenly, she heard a resounding tattoo of horses' hooves on the loose planking of the bridge. The racket echoed from the marsh trees walling the stream.

Cleavenger cracked his whip, ordering his pack to the side of the road to allow the horsemen to pass.

But they did not ride by.

The horses came off the bridge, drew alongside the coffle, and reined in. Hoping, and yet not daring to hope, Miz Lucretia jerked up her head. She bit her lip to keep from crying out in exultance and thanksgiving. Praise God. They had not forgotten. They had come for her. Tears brimmed and burned her eyes. She felt she could forgive herself for crying a little. She was so damned tired.

She saw Mem first. He didn't look like a knight in shining armor, riding a Falconhurst workhorse bareback. She saw Doc Redfield with a faint flaring of shock. Beyond him was Lewis Gassaway, and he looked like the avenging angel of God. One of Gassaway's sons pulled in behind them.

"There she is." Lewis Gassaway nodded toward Lucretia Borgia in the train. "Thank God we found her before he got away with her."

Cleavenger took his time. He coiled up his bullwhip and secured it to his saddlehorn. Then, taking his gun loosely under his right arm and braced across his legs, he rode forward between his caravan and the riders.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Is there something I can do for you? Maybe you see a black or two you'd like to buy. . . . Name's Cleavenger, and tradin' blacks is my business. I can say I have some bargains for the right man. Most of my stock is for sale."

"'Fraid there is some little mistake, suh," Lewis Gassaway said. "You seem to have left Falconhurst with one of the servants that don't belong to you."

Cleavenger kept that flat smile on his face. "You must know I is smarter than that, gentlemen. I ain't about to be caught on no open road without'n I got bills of sales for all my animals. I got them all. Title and quit claim an' all—an' birth certificates for them as has 'em."

"We'll just take the woman there. Lucretia Borgia," Gassaway said, "an' we won't make no stir about it.

You jus' turn over the woman, an' we let you go your way."

"Wait a minute," Cleavenger said. "Are you suggestin' that I stole this wench?"

"Same as," Gassaway said.

"Well, suh, I find that most insultin'," Cleavenger said. "I am an honorable man. I deals in slaves, but that gives you no right to bad-mouth me."

"We just wastin' time. You turn the woman over to us. We wants to get her back home befo' dark."

"Afraid I can't do that. I paid for this slave an'—"

"You paid five hundred dollars." Gassaway suddenly lost his temper. His voice crackled like the snap of Cleavenger's bullwhip. "That's the same as stealin'. . . . You stole the woman. . . . You give her back. We return your five hundred. You swear to clear out of this country—we say no more."

"Five hundred?" Cleavenger shook his head. He removed the bill of sale from his pocket. "I know I got myself a sharp bargain. But that ain't stealin'—an' it ain't even illegal. Not so long as I got this bill of sale."

"We're not going to let you get away with it," Doc Redfield said.

Cleavenger glanced toward the vet, a faint smile twisting his mouth. "You mind saying how you going to stop me?"

"With guns if we have to," said the Gassaway boy.

Lewis Gassaway held up his hand. "We want no trouble. We don't think you want trouble—"

"Don't want trouble," Cleavenger agreed. "Still, I don't mean to be cheated out of my first chance to make a decent profit in ten years. I know blacks. You gentlemen know 'em. Look at my coffle. The best I can round up. Scum and dregs and leavin's . . . Best I can hope for is to unload them for workin' in the delta cane fields. But not this here Borgia woman . . . she can make me rich. Unless you gentlemen are talkin' four, five thousand dollars, I got nothin' more to say to you."

"You don't listen to reason," Gassaway said, "we'll

be forced to use our guns. One way or another, we mean to take Lucretia Borgia back home to Falconhurst with us."

"No way you can do that," Cleavenger said. "Not unless you got five thousand. In cash. I don't take no paper. Otherwise, you gentlemen excuse me; we got a long trip ahead of us."

"Are you unreasonable enough to try to stand against three of us—three armed men? No matter that you're armed, you can't shoot more than one of us. Won't profit you much to be killed."

"Don't plan on being killed," Cleavenger said. "Don't plan on shootin' airy one of you men. This here gun is fixed right now on that Borgia woman's head. First one of you makes a move to lift his weapon against me, I'm going to blow her head off."

"Don't be insane, man," Gassaway said.

"Don't no way figure I'm anything but the only truly sane one of us," Cleavenger said. "I got a bill of sale. This slave gal is mine. Mine to keep or sell or kill if'n I want to. You men mean to take her away from me. . . . If I can't keep her, she no good to me. If she's no good to me, I don't give a damn that she's dead or alive. Go ahead, gentlemen. Make your move, and I blow her goddamn head off as she stands there."

The horsemen hesitated, looked at one another. Young Gassaway looked ready to bring up his gun, but his father held up his hand and shook his head. "They's got to be some other way," he said.

Cleavenger laughed. "They is. Come up with five thousand. In gold. This here bitch is the fust top-quality fancy-blooded house-broke animal I is ever had to offer. Ain't nobody goin' stop me. Ain't nobody goin' stand in my way. She mine to sell, and she gone bring me top dollar."

XXI

The ornate upright clock on the stairwell landing ticked off the minutes in the frangible silence that hung over Falconhurst. The movement, verge escapement of hard-wrought brass and oil-tempered steel pinions and pivots, counted off the seconds in stolid progression. The oaken case, extra-heavy hardwood and kiln-dried, not only acted as a sounding board; it was beautifully embossed and carved throughout, and handcrafted ornaments adorned the tops and sides. On either side of the elaborate doors two massive oak columns added a sturdy richness to the stately antique. All of its joints were precisely fitted, handcrafted, its glass door decorated in black and gold.

For a long time in the late afternoon, the clock was the loudest sound within the stricken manor house.

Warren Maxwell sat up in his bed, propped against pillows stacked upon the headboard. His friends, relatives, and servants stood grouped about as if holding watch beside his deathbed. But the master of Falconhurst was not dying. He did keep saying that he felt as if he died a little inside, and once in a while, during a long lull in the halting dialogues, he would call out in frantic and futile wail for his "own Lucretia Borgia." The fact was, he was physically stronger and mentally more alert than

he had been for weeks and, with his mind turned outward from the frailties and vexations of his own body, he seemed almost vigorous and dictatorial.

Though darkness swirled and gathered and clouded beyond the windows, nobody thought for the moment to light the lamps. This was the kind of chore overseen by the missing Lucretia Borgia.

"My Gawd, we'll miss that gal," Maxwell lamented, staring at his gnarled hands clasped on the counterpane. "So many little things 'round here that we all taken for granted . . . Lucretia, she took care of 'em, so we hardly noticed they was being done."

Vesta sank to the side of the bed and covered his hands with both of hers. "Oh, Cousin Warren, I know you must hate me. I just hope that someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive this grievous wrong I've done you."

"Ain't your fault," Maxwell said. "You didn't know any better."

Though they had been over her motives at least a dozen times during the eternal afternoon, she said once more, "I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought you'd be so proud of me." She lowered her head, sniffing, and Bower Ledbetter stepped forward and placed his arm about her slender shoulder, supporting her. "That Mr. Cleavenger . . . that awful Mr. Cleavenger . . . he misled me. He said he was offering me—five times what you could hope to get for a fat colored woman like Lucretia Borgia on any market. . . . And I'm sorry. I believed him. He was so persuasive."

"Of course he was," Lewis Gassaway said. He and his son Vance and Doc Redfield stood at parade rest along the foot of the old bed. The three men were sweated with fatigue and frustration and defeat. They twisted their battered hats in their hands, shifted from one mud-smeared boot to the other in discomfort. They had returned from an emergency mission and they had failed. For the elder Gassaway, especially, this failing was most galling. He was not a man who cared to admit

to failure under any conditions—such admission seemed somehow to reflect disparagingly upon his honor and his manhood. “Of course that rascal was persuasive, Miss Vesta. Minute he laid eyes on a smart and clever animal like that Lucretia Borgia, he was obsessed with ownin’ her. Had you refused to sell, likely he would have stolen her.”

“Oh, he meant to take her, all right.” Doc Redfield nodded emphatically. “He’d of stolen her if’n that was the only way he could get holt of her.”

“Why, damn it all, he *did* steal her,” Warren Maxwell said, voice rattling in the room. “Five hundred dollars for a colossal female animal like that. An’ her actin’ almost human. It’s worse than theft. It’s disgraceful. . . . Oh, that slave trader knew what he was doing, all right. And when he saw that poor Vesta heah had no idea at all of a slave’s value, his plan was plain as the nose on your face.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Vesta whispered. She kept her head lowered. “The poor, dear woman . . . I don’t know what got into me. . . . All I could think was that Cousin Warren was going to be so proud of me.”

“Now, you quit blamin’ yo’self, Missy,” Maxwell said. “You jes’ a woman. How you know what slaves are worth? Why, I never in all the years your cousin Sophie an’ me was married, never once did I discuss the sale or the matin’ of slaves in her presence.”

“Of course not.” Lewis Gassaway nodded in fierce agreement. “Ain’t no fittin’ subject for a lady’s delicate ears.”

“So you quit faultin’ yourself, Miss Vesta,” Maxwell said. “Lewis is right. You had no way of knowin’ what you was doin’. . . . We ain’t none of us a-blamin’ you in no way. . . . It’s jes’ that this terrible thing has been done and we menfolks has got to strategize some way to undo it.”

“Well, now, I can tell you. That ain’t going to be so easy.” Lewis Gassaway shook his head. “We ain’t dealin’ with no ordinary thief here. This man has likely spent

his life pullin' deals like this—stealin' an expensive slave and then hightailin' it out of the countryside afore you can sic the law on him."

"That's right," young Vance Gassaway said. "No tellin' where he's got them slaves by now."

"He travelin' by horse," Maxwell objected. "But them slaves are shackled or spanceled. They ain't movin' all that fast."

"I'm sorry, suh," Vance said. "You jus' don't know what kind of man this Cleavenger is. His mind's a-workin', spinnin' an' wheelin' all the time. They is more than one way to travel. They is all kinds of roads and traces and trails and even paths."

"Afraid Vance is right," Gassaway agreed. "When I threatened to go at once to Benson and to bring the sheriff after him, Cleavenger jus' sat there on that horse of his'n and laughed in my face. 'You go ahaid and do that, Mister,' he said to me. 'Jes' don't expect me to sit 'round here and wait for you.'"

Maxwell winced. "You fellows jus' should of nevah let that scalawag out'n your sight."

"Wasn't nothin' else we could do," Gassaway said, his voice vibrant with self-hatred. "Not a blessed thing. He had us checkmated. Check and mate. If'n we'd made one false move, he would have shot Lucretia Borgia's head off."

"Oh, my Gawd," Maxwell wailed.

"They wasn't no doubt he would of done it, Warren," Doc Redfield said. He nodded, remembering, his ruddy face going pale. "You could jus' see in his eyes. They was crazy-like. An' he said it in plain words: If he couldn't have Lucretia Borgia, she wasn't wuth a damn to him and he would blow her head off. An' he sat there. Wasn't more'n two or three feet from her. That gun fixed on her cool as pork. Oh, he would of shot her daid, all right, an' we hadn't backed off like we did."

"We backed off for jus' one reason in this world," Lewis Gassaway said. He spoke almost plaintively. "We

backed off to spare Lucretia Borgia's life. For no other reason."

The other two men who had ridden with him nodded in agreement. "An' whilst that Cleavenger was threatenin' to blow Lucretia Borgia's haid off," Vance Gassaway said, "you could look at him and see he was already plannin' miles an' hours ahead of that moment. You could jus' look at him and see the way he was thinking. Plain enough, he had been in scrapes exactly like that one a lot of times before, and he'd gotten out of all of them—an' with a whole skin. You could see that in the arrogant way he grinned at us."

"He dared us to make a move," Doc said.

"An' he surely was not bluffin'," Lewis Gassaway added. "I seen his finger quivering on that trigger. He was watchin' us hawk-close. If'n one of us had been fool enough to lift a gun, he'd of kilt her before we could have hoped to do him any harm."

"We overtook him at the bridge over the Tombigbee," Vance said. "But ain't no sense of going back there looking for him by now, I can tell you. In his mind he was already makin' tracks out of that area long before Pa and Doc an' me ever considered backin' down to his threats."

Maxwell scrubbed his twisted hands together, his face bleak. He nodded toward his friends. "Ain't no way doubtin' you done your best."

"Done all we could," Gassaway said almost in a defiant way.

"Nobody could of done no more," Maxwell said. "I hope you fellows realize I know that. I see plain what you was up against. . . . It's just that— God help me." His voice broke. "Sick as I am an' with this big farm to run an' all, I don't see how I'm goin' to git along without that Lucretia Borgia. She like my own right arm."

For some long moments a heavy silence settled in the darkening room, each of them lost in thoughts of his own. Doc Redfield was thinking that as soon as he politely could, he would send a rider with word that he'd

be forced to spend another night at Falconhurst. Maxwell's illness, his depression over the loss of his overseer-servant, the probability of a posse, all these things required his presence at the stud farm. He drew a deep breath. With Miz Lucretia away, he would choose his own bedwench tonight. He could seek out the most choice of the thirteen-year-olds. Nothing like a blossoming young wench to revive an aging man.

Gassaway was mapping in his mind some of the escape routes open to the wily Cleavenger. He even wondered if bringing the sheriff from Benson would serve any reasonable purpose at this hour. Tracing Cleavenger in that swamp country was going to be like hunting a raccoon in the bayous.

Young Vance Gassaway shifted impatiently. The problem with dealing with old men: they were tentative, they hesitated when they should be moving, they talked when it was time for action. Once Cleavenger got his coffle out of the county, the sheriff was going to be of no value to them. Anyhow, a loud posse, made up of men like his father and the vet, would only alarm Cleavenger well in advance. Very likely, Lucretia Borgia would be dead if they found the caravan. And then they would be helpless. Stealing a Negro was a crime; killing one was harder to prosecute. Not one of the blacks in the train would be permitted to testify against Cleavenger, because blacks could not give testimony against a white person in any court of law. Vance shuddered slightly, a chill of frustration washing down through him.

The room grew darker. Near the corridor door, Mem stood unmoving, tears seeping down his cheeks. He waited, but he did not speak.

Maxwell massaged the swollen joints of one hand with the callused palm of the other. He was tired and hungry and heartbroken, and he had not had a fresh toddy since sometime this morning. He felt as if the world were crumbling about him. He sat in the darkling room and knew someone should fire up the lamps, but no one did. He kept waiting for one of the servant girls to arrive

with vestas, but nothing happened. He felt a wave of self-pity engulf him. God had taken his only begotten son from him, lost him somewhere in the Texies, and now Lucretia Borgia was gone. It was as if some evil god had hacked out his heart and then lopped off his right arm, leaving him to bleed to death in loneliness and despair.

"Oh, my Gawd," he wailed aloud. "Oh, my Gawd. Lucretia Borgia. Where is she?"

"She's not here, Cousin Warren," Vesta whispered.

He wept aloud. "Goddamn it. She's got to be here. I need her."

"We're going to find her if we can, Warren," Doc Redfield said. "We're going to do all we can."

"We just got to figure," Vance Gassaway said, "how we can come in on Cleavenger unsuspected, catchin' him unawares, before he can do away with Lucretia Borgia."

"Oh, my Gawd," Maxwell wailed again at the horror of this thought.

"Don't fret yourself, Warren. We doin' all we can," Doc said again. He walked around the bed, fired up a sulphur match by striking it on his thumbnail. He tilted the glass on the bedside lamp, turned up the wick, and set fire to it. The flame guttered and then burned evenly. He lowered the wick, and tendrils of light spread out across the room. Doc glanced at Maxwell. "Maybe Mem could run down and find out about supper, Warren?"

"Course he ought." Maxwell straightened on the bed, gratified to have a target for his frustration and grief. "Why you standin' there a-sniffin', you no-account yeller nigger?" he said. "Stir yo' stumps, boy. Now that Lucretia Borgia gone, lot more goin' be on your shoulders. . . . You git downstairs and tell them in the kitchen that we got company fo' dinner, and that they been ridin' hard, and they tired, and they wants cold cider served with dinner—and they want that dinner served fast."

Mem nodded and slithered from the room, glad to

escape. He padded down the corridor to the rear stairwell, hurrying. His eyes filled with tears again, but he brushed them away before he reached the foot of the steps and entered the kitchen. . . .

"Eatin' supper. There's a prime idea," Maxwell said. "We all feel better; we all think better on full stomachs. We got a big problem heah, but I declare I do believe it to be nothin' we cain't handle with proper plannin'."

"Just one thing," Vance said. "All the time we a-plannin', that wily fox Cleavenger is movin' them blacks out'n this county, out'n our reach."

Maxwell stared at the youth and sobbed again. Lewis Gassaway swore at his offspring. "Gad almighty, son, I wish you wouldn't say so many things to upset poor Mr. Maxwell. He got enough on his mind, an' you upsettin' him."

"Jes' saying true," Vance muttered between clenched teeth. "Findin' her ain't goin' to be easy. Gettin' her back alive ain't goin' to be easy."

"Now, that's enough, damn it," Lewis Gassaway said. He apologized to Miss Vesta for daring to swear in her presence. She smiled wanly and waved her slender fingers; it did not matter—she understood and she was gracious about it in these anguished moments.

"Don't know what I'd do without'n you heah to succor me in these evil times, Cousin Vesta." Maxwell's eyes brimmed with grateful tears. He closed his hands on Vesta's. As an afterthought he looked up and said, "An' you too, of course, Cousin Bower."

"We jes' pleased and happy to do what we can," Bower said. He cleared his throat as if uncomfortable at finding himself the center of even this much attention.

Maxwell noticed that Mem had returned and stood round-shouldered just inside the corridor door. He spoke loudly. "Well, boy, what about it? We serving these gen'men cider with they meal?"

"I tole 'em," Mem said.

"All right. All right. Is it time to go downstairs? Is supper ready?"

Mem quailed, afraid to speak the words. "Ain't no supper, Masta."

"No supper? Goddamn it, why not?"

"I ax them," Mem said. "I ax them why not. They say 'cause nobody tole 'em to start cookin' it."

"Oh, my Gawd," Maxwell wailed, rolling his head from side to side. "Lucretia Borgia. My Gawd. Where are you, Lucretia Borgia?"

XXII

Lucretia Borgia slogged through the ankle-deep mud of the unknown road. She stayed frightened, sickened, fevered all the time now. The shackle had quickly slashed and chewed at her leg. Bleeding and open, the wound became infected overnight, crusted with blood and matted with flies. The infection in the proud, torn, and suppurated flesh spread upward, making her ill, and her illness destroyed her will, her resolve; and any last inner strength. She was reduced to a trembling, melancholic sense of confusion; she was disoriented, nauseated. She drifted into a kind of apathy. The fire and agony in her ankle was maddening, every twist of the metal as she stepped exploded against the crown of her skull, and yet even the immediacy of that malignity no longer had the force to disturb her. She did not care.

The skies had opened like the floodgates of heaven all night long, spewing and spilling in relentless torrents of rain. The slaves huddled in the open, covering themselves as best they could but unable to escape the storm. Everything was soaked, and water stood in black puddles everywhere. They crouched, miserable, unable to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time.

The rain abated to a drizzle before dawn. The morning star had barely appeared when Cleavenger cracked his

bullwhip over the sleeping slaves. "On your feet," he ordered. "Up and stirring . . . Got a long way to go."

A black man spoke in a hesitant, wavering voice. "Where-at we headed, Masta?"

Cleavenger scowled, raging. "None of your goddamn business where-at we headed, boy. You goddamn burr-headed nigger. Daring to question me. I tells you where-at we're a-goin' and when we goin' . . . All you got to do is learn to jump when Masta Foye Cleavenger say jump."

"Yes, suh, Masta. But we been walkin' a mighty long time. A fur piece. You dis keeps sayin' we got a long way to go. Tha's all you evah say."

Cleavenger laughed loudly. "Well, it is a long way to them delta cane fields, and that's where you're headed, boy. Sure hell, nobody else would buy you. So you jus' keep walkin' till I say you stop."

"Yes, suh. I tryin' to do that, Masta. But I got the miseries. . . . I don't want to cause no upset, but I 'fraid I fall an' we keep on walking."

Cleavenger laughed at him again. "Won't 'cause no upset an' you fall in your tracks, boy. We jes' loose your chains and let you lay. Be hardly any loss."

The coffle moved out in the waning darkness. "We look for a farm somewhere. Maybe we can get some breakfast," Cleavenger told them. He rode, eating biscuits covered with honey.

When the sun came out above the horizon, it cooked steam out of the mud puddles and the road itself, and blazed in blinding intensity. The heat boiled the tiny clouds to wisps of steam and dispersed them across a faded, gray-washed sky. A humid, suffocating warmth rose from the wet earth. The pitiless blaze of the sun, as early as it was, seared the flesh and sapped any last vestiges of energy as it sucked moisture from plants and trees and sand.

The sorry caravan moved by short, forced, and impatient spans, all day, every day, from dusk to sunset. Cleavenger kept the train plodding, with grudgingly spaced rest periods, as if the Furies pursued him. Lucretia

Borgia never saw him check the backtrails, but she had the sense that he rode alert, wary, always glancing nervously over his shoulder, looking for the law, his enemies, or maybe fate itself.

She felt covered with vile. Cleavenger never allowed the pack to stop long enough to bathe in the forest creeks. Since personal cleanliness was almost a fetish with Lucretia Borgia, she suffered as much from the filth and body lice as from physical pain and mental torment. She began to itch, burn, and suffer from sweat and heat and fetid grime. The other blacks did not notice the lack of sanitation, and anyway they were too tired to care, exhausted all the time, mud-smeared and bone-weary from their eternal journey to nowhere.

Lucretia Borgia had no idea how many days she had been away from Falconhurst. She had lost track of time in a nausea of pain and distress. Her hopes had flared when she'd seen Mr. Gassaway and Doc Redfield and Mem riding after the coffle, come to fetch her home. She was hurtled into despair by their failure and impotent withdrawal under Cleavenger's threat. She had believed he would shoot her rather than allow her to return to Falconhurst with the horsemen, but death had not seemed the worst alternative—then or now. . . .

When Cleavenger was certain Gassaway and the people from Falconhurst had actually conceded defeat and departed, he searched the area until he located a river dweller with a flat-bottomed boat. In the darkness he had loaded his coffle, horse, and mule aboard the raft. For eternal hours they had drifted downstream, the boatman using a long, slick pole to steer and to propel the craft in the swift-running waters.

She had no idea where they left the river. They disembarked beneath a wood and metal bridge. The boatman had disappeared in the darkness. Cleavenger had told the blacks to bed down for the night. "We gettin' an early start in the mornin'."

Lucretia Borgia sank to the clay bank, realizing for the first time how truly lost and helpless she was. Even

if Gassaway alerted the sheriff and a posse trailed them, there was little chance they would find them now. She knew Cleavenger would relentlessly put the miles between his caravan and the law of Benson and the vengeance of Falconhurst.

She was aware that Cleavenger was standing over her on the clay shelf. His booted legs were parted. In his left fist he held the coiled rope. With a start of shock and revulsion she saw he clasped his trousered but tumescent staff in his right hand.

He grinned down at her. "You ain't like these blacks," he said. "You valuable. You also look damn good to me. See what I got for you? You be good to me—an' I make it easy for you."

She spoke in a low, flat tone. "You git away from me, white man. Ain't one way you git me. That you kill me. . . . I won't be wuth nothin' to you if I dead . . . an' if I beat, it cost you too."

"Smart-ass nigger wench, ain't you?"

Lucretia Borgia heard the toothless crone lying on the grass beside her laugh in the darkness. She shivered. "You make up yo' mind, white man. You beat me. Or you kill me. Or you let me alone."

The next morning Cleavenger headed them west again. He had stood for a long time over Lucretia Borgia, holding himself boldly. Then he heeled about, grabbed the arm of a black girl, and staggered upward into the darkness.

He said nothing more to Lucretia Borgia. But he treated her as if she were one of the rabble. She said nothing to him. Though her ankle soon tore and bled, she asked for no relief; the legs of the people around her were torn and bleeding. She clamped her jaws tight, set her teeth, and plodded west.

The sparsely traveled road, slashed with timeless ruts, eroded by fissures, and overgrown with spindly patches of wiregrass, seemed to wind eternally through wet, steamy forests and dank cypress swamps.

She walked, seldom looking up, seldom bothering to speak, her mind turned inward.

The days passed in a kind of fevered unreality, the humid mornings, the blazing noon, the endless afternoons, the silent sunsets, and every step taking her farther from Falconhurst. With darkness came slight relief. By nightfall faint breezes tempered the heat and whispered in the tall oaks and, fatigued, the coffer slept.

They met few travelers on any of the many roads between the far-flung settlements. The chained caravan occasionally overtook white farmers and black helpers, with mules or flatbed wagons, headed for the nearest market. When they passed farms, their chains clanking, children ran out and stood staring, at the fences. They either waved and smiled, or cursed and villified the passing blacks. Sometimes, for their own amusement, farmers would set their dogs on the shackled Negroes, finding it comical the way they cringed and screamed and fell over one another helplessly.

Lucretia Borgia plodded, biting back the sour sickness that rose into her throat. No matter what she tried to concentrate on, she could not escape the hopeless terror of her capture and imprisonment. The horror and mortification, and most of all the degradation, the humiliation, and indignity, the desolating loss of her identity, her position, her place in life, which had been so slowly and agonizingly won. Not even in her worst nightmares had anything like this occurred to her. She had not been able to believe that she, Miz Lucretia Borgia, a house Negress, trained and experienced, accomplished and efficient, would under any circumstances be manhandled as if she were a rabid dog, and marched, shackled, and driven in company of the most ignorant of field hands.

She looked around her, incredulous, but made fearfully aware of the cold reality by the fevered agony flaring upward from her infected leg. This was like some grievous ordeal that must end soon but that never ended at all. And it was not only her selfish need to be free. What would become of Falconhurst Plantation without

her? The old farm would crumble into decay and dilapidation with her away. She swallowed hard at the ball of agony that formed in her throat.

She moaned helplessly and writhed as if she could no longer endure existence within her own skin. Troubled, she looked around, but the blacks near her were too exhausted and too apathetic to notice her anguish. They did not see beyond that fiery knot of pain behind their own lackluster eyes. They were unlike any beings she had ever encountered in her life before. No matter what the slaver Cleavenger did to them, they would never protest, never rebel. They were too cowed and beaten in spirit to oppose any evil from without. They were trying to stay alive, and this was all they were trying to do, and they were not even sure why they struggled for this. With the slaver they had some sort of existence; as long as they dumbly obeyed him, they were fed and kept together and promised something down the road.

She glanced around at the shabby, wretched figures caught somehow in a hell far worse than anything that lay behind or ahead of them, on either side of birth or death. They no longer even bothered to talk to one another. When they did speak, they slurred their words in extreme echthipsis—such thick suppression of sounds for each word that she was barely able to understand them even when they spoke directly to her. They were half-wild, like aliens to her. She had nothing more in common with them than the flesh tones of their skin, their ethnic heritage. They not only spoke this strange, slurring patois that was like another language to her; they were from a different world than she had ever known. Not the lowliest of the Falconhurst-bred blacks—those so mentally unstable or retarded that they could not be taught simple crafts—not even they were as low as these human dregs. And now she was one of them.

She put her head back, staring upward at the sun, her jaw clamped shut. Who could look at her and say she was different from them? She was covered with their body lice, their crabs sidled through her pubic hairs; she

shared the slop Cleavenger fed them, she was as filthy as any of them, her clothing wretched and stained and soured. Aye, God, she was one of them.

She plodded slowly, feeling that this malevolent trial must somehow end. The haughty, prideful Lucretia Borgia brought low, degraded to a fat nigger wench in a stinking coffle of human culls, debased, belittled, shackled.

She bit back a sob as the metal chewed deeper into her flesh. She did not bother to glance down. She let the fiery charge of pain flood through her body and pass for the instant until she put that foot down again. Maybe in that shackle, and in its agony, she would find her escape. Already livid red lines spread like stria up from her ankle across her calf.

She began to hope the poison would spread, and quickly, before the slaver noticed. She no longer wanted to live. Death glowed before her, a surcease, an escape from pain and degradation. She was one of these miserable beasts, and she could not live like that.

Everything was gone; she no longer wanted to live.

Instinctively, she reached up to touch at that red turban which she wore unfailingly in public to hide the thick, short, wiry shock of hair she hated. Even her red turban was gone. Lordy, how her enemies would dearly love to see her now. She shivered in shame. How she had strode about Falconhurst, full of false pride, in her calico dresses and her mother-of-pearl buttons, her bright scarlet turban bound rakishly around her head to give her that touch of exotic beauty, her single gold earring glittering. The very way she walked told people who she was. She gained respect on sight, an impressive and authoritative woman who made the men grin and lick their lips when she passed by.

No more. That Lucretia Borgia was already dead; it remained only for the infection to burn the existence from this ugly lice-covered shell that remained.

Now she was reduced to nothingness, plunged into a strange, vile world of pain and torment. To this slave trader, to the lethargic blacks around her, and more and

more in her own failing estimation, she was a shattered creature, less than human, lower than a battered animal. Blood throbbed in her temples, and the agony in her leg never abated for a moment.

From some eternal distance away she heard the crack of Cleavenger's whip; even that inhuman threat no longer held any terror for her. The slaver shouted for them to haul in, they were camping on the knoll above them for the night.

Numbly, Lucretia Borgia plodded upslope. When the blacks around her stopped walking and slumped to the ground, she knelt with them. She lay down, curled up, her bloody leg extended.

She was not aware that Cleavenger was yelling her name until the crone beside her shook her arm. It was as if she were half asleep, or in a narcosis of pain.

Cleavenger strode through the prostrate coffle. "Lucretia. Borgia. When I yell for you, you answer me. You been lazing too long. You goin' fix supper tonight."

Lucretia barely heard him, only dimly understood. She did not answer or move. Then she saw that the crone had caught up her bloody leg and was displaying it like a rack of lamb to the slaver.

"Jesus Christ," she heard Cleavenger mutter. "That's proud flesh. Might be gangrene. You bitch. What you tryin' to do? Kill yo'self?"

He acted swiftly. He unlocked the shackle from about her leg and tossed it aside. From a lard bucket he smeared her calf, ankle, and foot with a thick paste of a greasy blue petroleum jelly. The stuff looked and smelled like axle grease, and yet from the moment it coated her torn flesh, the fever cooled, the pain ebbed.

He remained kneeling beside her until he had swathed her foot and leg in a bandage. He cursed her as he worked. "Goddamn you. What you tryin' to do? Lose that laig? Whyn't you tell me? What would of happened if'n ole toothless Vahrina heah hadn't yelled to me? No. You black bitch, you ain't gittin' 'way from me that easy. I seen a hundred cuts like this before. Ain't never lost

me a nigger yet from gangrene. Ain't about to lose you. Not at the prices smart-ass nigger wenches is bringin' these days."

He found a fieldstone and placed her foot, elevated, upon it. "You be able to walk by mornin'," he said. He shrugged and turned away.

Lucretia Borgia felt a strange cool flush of relief almost at once. Her mind cleared, the nausea lifted, the desolation waned. She began to think about living again, about defeating this slaver, of being once again Miz Lucretia Borgia with a beautiful white-toothed smile and an exotic red turban. She would live.

She was aware that Cleavenger was standing, immobile, above her, staring down at her. She had not yet spoken to him. She did not speak now. She sagged back, breathing deeply, finding faint renewed hope in life. She stared up at him. She met his gaze and her eyes did not waver under his.

Cleavenger cursed, peering down at her. His mustached mouth twisted. "Well, for hell's sake, bitch. Ain't you even gonna thank me?"

Her gaze held his, unflinching. Her voice shook slightly, but in outrage, not weakness. "For what? I'm still alive, ain't I?"

XXIII

Lucretia Borgia's ankle was not reshackled when the coffle broke camp the next morning. Instead, a size-12 iron jack chain was locked at the small of her back, allowing her to move freely the short length of the welded restraint.

Her fever had subsided during the night. She recovered sufficiently by dawn to feel the faint return of that old indomitable spirit. She demanded that Cleavenger allow her to bathe in the creek with scrub cloth and lye soap. She even washed out her calico dress and underthings, standing belly-deep in the swift-rushing stream, aware that the others watched, fascinated, black and white alike. She did not care.

With clean if damp clothing, freshly scrubbed body, and newly wrapped and medicated ankle, she felt almost human again. She shoved the slovenly black women aside at the firepit. She mixed and cooked batter cakes of flour, salt, and creek water and served them with watered honey. Even Cleavenger ate ravenously.

After breakfast, with the morning breezes heating up and the first rays of the sun brightening leaves, trees, and meadows, the caravan took to the trace again. Miz Lucretia Borgia strode along in the middle of the coffle, walking with her head up, feeling herself wanting to live

again, able to hope, even when she didn't yet know for what. . . .

All she knew was that the pain in her leg had subsided; she no longer straggled, not even fully aware of what was going on around her. She was alive again.

Foye Cleavenger kept his train plodding steadily south and west across Alabama. Often roads were no more than faint weed-choked traces through deep forests. Tough decisions occupied him where rough paths forked. Few such sites were marked by road signs; usually any signs left hanging had lettering obliterated by time, weather, or grapeshot.

At noon he loosened the chain so that Lucretia Borgia could cook grits and rabbit for lunch. As soon as he turned his back she broke and ran into the woods.

Cleavenger sprang into the saddle and rode after her. He overtook her in a pine hammock. He lunged from the horse, tackling her. She mauled him like a panther until he struck her across the chin with his fist. She was still dizzy and unsure where she was when he returned her to the grinning coffle.

In the middle of the next afternoon they entered a settlement where the east-west and north-south traces intersected. The village sprawled, an anemic clutter of clapboard houses, stables, and a general store.

People came out of the shacks, walking to the rim of shade of their stoops to stare as the coffle plodded past, led by the slouching horseman and trailed by a scantily packed mule. Foye reined in close to the wooden steps outside the general store.

A thin, balding man of indeterminate age huddled under a wool blanket, with a knitted shawl across his shoulders, in a rocking chair beside the screened double doors of the store. His bearded face was sun-weathered. He shivered in the eighty-degree heat.

The storekeeper peered at the coffle, then he nodded toward Cleavenger. "Got yo'self quite a passel of nigras."

"On my way to New Orleans."

The store owner shook his head. "Not much of a coffle for New Orleans markets."

Cleavenger straightened slightly in his saddle, offended. "I'll make some trades."

"Don't 'pear to me you got much to offer—'ceptin' that big wench yonder. She got a certain look to her."

"She's a Falconhurst nigger." Cleavenger's voice vibrated with pride.

"You're tryin' to gull me?"

"No. I ain't. Got myself a special deal. Going to make myself a real profit on her. Some of the others might have to sell off for the cane fields. But I'll make out all right."

The storekeeper was leaning forward, staring at Lucretia Borgia over the rims of his glasses. "She house-broke?"

"House-broke? Man, she run the farm for them Maxwell folks. She so smart, she almost human. Got human blood, I reckon. She a Hausa. A Hausa with human blood. Healthy."

"How much you askin'?"

Now it was Cleavenger's turn to laugh in disdain. "Why you care?"

"I might be interested. Last gal I had died of the bedfever. Some months back. Got a cook and a stable boy. But I need a housekeeper. An' I had one—if she smart like you say—she could help me run the store. . . . An' I need a bedwench with plenty of flesh on her. I git pretty cold during the night."

"What ails you? You got the malaria?"

"Reckon. Comes and goes. Sometimes, I shake like the aguer. Teeth chatter. Other times, I'm pretty normal. 'Ceptin' I stay cold all the time."

Cleavenger shook his head. "Well, I don't reckon I could part with my Falconhurst wench. I'm having to ask top dollar."

The man's eyes glittered behind his glasses. "Did I ast you that? I'm a man don't question when I want some-

thing. You ast anybody. Vernon Preston makes up his mind to want something, he buys it, and cost no object."

"I couldn't let this Falconhurst wench go for under five thousand."

"Five thousand. You been smokin' a China pipe?"

"I told you she was too dear for you."

"I didn't say that. All I'm suggestin' is, Vernon Preston is a businessman too. I got to know I'm buyin' quality, whether I spent five dollars or five thousand. . . . I wa'n't born yesterday, suh. Been heah at Preston Corners long time. This town named for my pappy. I wouldn't buy a hound dog less'n I made sure of the quality. You got papers on her?"

"Of course I do. I told you she straight from Falconhurst Plantation."

"You say it. But kin you prove it?"

"Comes a man showin' me cash, I kin prove anything he wants proved, Mr. Preston. You ain't dealin' with no flight-by-nighter here, neither. Foye Cleavenger is a respected name amongst slave traders—from Natchez to Charleston. I sells what a man pays for—you need bozals for field work, or top-quality fancies, I can deliver, and I guarantee my merchandise. . . . You don't find many traders can say that."

"Why don't you plan to stop off here awhile, let me think on this? Let us talk on it. I might offer you top dollar for the wench yonder. Give you a chance to buy new blacks and go into New Orleans in style—and pick up yo'self some real profit."

Cleavenger glanced toward the sun. "Well, I don't know. Got us a long way to go. Ought to be gittin' on down the road. Got shackled niggers, you don't travel too fast."

"Hell, you got to feed 'em, ain't you? I kin have my cook fix somethin' plain but substantial. Pry the ribs apart. Stick in the belly. Cost you two bits a head."

"Don't usually waste money like that—buyin' food for nigras. Kill squirrel, raccoons, rabbits, birds along the way. Grits and gravy. That's good enough for

nigras. . . . Anyhow, they like dogs—don't call for more'n one good feedin' a day."

"Maybe that's why your coffle looks so poorly. You got to feed blacks right. Sweetenin' and ham and lamb. Got to give them sleek skins and clear eyes."

"You tryin' to tell me how to handle nigras?"

"Somebody ought to. You hang 'round. Let my cook fix for 'em. They perk up. You feed 'em right twixt heah an' New Orleans, you might be able to sell 'em at vendue."

Cleavenger didn't speak. Preston got up, opened the screen door. This set up a fluttering of blue flies swarming about his head. After a moment he returned with sliced wedges of rat cheese, soda crackers, and a bucket of milk. Cleavenger began shaking his head. "How much is that goin' to cost me?"

Preston glanced at him, brow tilted. "Hell," he said. "You give me your word to stay overnight and let me inspect that Falconhurst wench out good—an' you got papers—an' a legal bill of sale—might be we can take this dollar or so out'n the cost of the wench."

The blacks squatted on the ground in front of the store. They wolfed down the cheese and crackers and gulped the milk from Mason jars dipped into the bucket. Lucretia took the food and stood eating daintily. They saw this was the motive behind Preston's providing food. He could tell in a moment whether the woman was a house Negro or not.

Preston watched the dainty way Lucretia handled her food, pleased.

Cleavenger watched too. He said, "I ain't guaranteeing you nothin' was you to buy the wench," he said. "Likely, less'n you kept her chained for a month or two, she'd run away. I turned her loose to cook, she ran. When I chased her down she clawed me."

Preston laughed, walking back and forth, gazing at Lucretia Borgia. "Needs a good horse-fucking, that's all she needs. Woman like that. Any woman gets cantankerous or ornery or wantin' to run things. Give them a

good horsing, and they quiets. Gentles the most shrewish bitch. Every time. Whether she black or human. You can't horse-fuck 'em now and then, they'll put you through hell. I can vouch for that. My wife, Mary June, was like that. Flary temper, moody, techy. Drove customers off with her temper. Till I just throwed her on the bean sacks in the back and crawled her when she acted up. She quieted down. Till she died. You don't handle a woman right, you can find yo'self livin' in the fiery pits of hell."

"Sounds like you an expert."

Preston laughed. "Sick or well, I got a eternal hard-on. Been that way all my life. Mount anything. Ain't no black boy randier'n me. . . . That's why I'm willing to pay top dollar for the right house-broke wench. An' I gits one smart as you warrant this here gal, she can help me run the store too. I'm livin' in high cotton. She keep me warm nights too. Go to sleep suckin' on them big titties, I will."

"Sounds like you got it all reckoned out," Cleavenger said. He dismounted and sagged against a stoop upright, watching his blacks and the scarecrow storekeeper.

"You shackle them blacks in my stable out back, stay over the night. Let me inspect the wench good, an' we dicker on it."

Cleavenger shrugged and nodded. "You kin look her over. But I ain't promisin' you that I sell or not."

Preston grinned coldly. "Bigger profit for you disposin' of her here than payin' some fee and commission to some auctioneer at a New Orleans barracoön. We both know that."

After the blacks had eaten, Lucretia Borgia was unhooked from the coffle and her chain secured to a stoop upright. The rest of the coffle was led around to the barn, where they were watered and shackled to stud rings for the night.

Preston prowled about Lucretia. He shoved her chin up with the heel of his hand and peered into her nostrils. He forced her mouth open and he checked her teeth

with his fingers. By now a crowd of townspeople had gathered in the street, squinting. "Buyin' yo'self a new housekeeper, Vernon?" one of the men asked.

"Might." Preston shrugged. "Ain't in no hurry about it. Got to look her over first."

"She a healthy-lookin' gal," somebody said.

"Costive to feed a wench like that," another suggested.

"Got plenty of vittles in the store," Preston said over his shoulder. "She a Falconhurst fancy. . . . Any of you evah heard of the Falconhurst Plantation Nigras?"

None of them had.

"Top grade, top quality," Preston assured them. And, as Cleavenger returned around the corner of the store, "Top askin' dollar too."

He waited until the slaver joined him. "Why don't we take her inside?" he said. "Got a back room where she can spend the night. Want to strip her down. Look her over."

"She in perfect condition," Cleavenger said.

"You reckon I takin' your word for that—an' you askin' me to spend five thousand? I got to know I gittin' my money's worth."

With the chain linked about his wrist, Cleavenger led Lucretia Borgia through the high-stacked aisles of the store. It smelled pleasantly of ground coffee and new leather and chocolate and bolts of cotton cloth.

Preston held open a door to a small room off the kitchen. Inside was a cot with a blanket folded at the head. "Take off the dress," he told Lucretia.

She simply stared at him coldly. She did not speak or move to obey.

"It's up to you, woman," Preston said. "You take it off, or we tie you down and take it off'n you."

She exhaled heavily and nodded. She pulled the rumpled calico dress over her head and stood naked before them, stripped, too, of her enormous pride.

Cleavenger closed the door and leaned against it. He stared at her, the magnificent breasts, full and high-standing and not yet sagging, though she'd borne and

suckled infants. Her legs were like fine mahogany, and her belly, ample, was nevertheless symmetrical.

She shivered with shame and hatred, standing naked before these two men. In a cold, efficient way, Preston moved around her. She could tell by the bulging at their flies that neither of the white men were entirely detached and businesslike.

"Man could change his luck with this wench a dozen times a day," Preston said.

She tried to ignore him, tried to stand straight and unbending. Her olive-black eyes were fixed on the bare walls beyond his head. Her mouth remained firm, her perfect, white-glowing teeth clamped tight, her chin squared and uncompromising.

Preston's hands moved over her flesh leisurely but expertly, as if she were horseflesh. He found no weals, no imperfections. She gasped when he parted her cheeks and thrust his third finger into her anus, but she gave no other sign that she was aware of him. With his hand between her thighs he spread the lips of her vagina, ran his palms down her inner thighs. When she thought this ordeal of mortification would never end, Preston stepped back, wiping his hands on his trousers. He nodded, regarding her admiringly. "She look pretty good. . . . We talk in the mornin', Mr. Cleavenger."

It must have been after ten o'clock before Foye Cleavenger fell asleep that night. He was restive, restless. He thought about going out to the barn and bringing one of the stabled wenches in to his bed, but he did not. He lay thinking ahead. If Preston Vernon bought the Falconhurst wench in the morning, Foye could move out on a new trail, on the road to prosperity for the first time in his life.

He kept seeing that Borgia woman's nakedness behind his eyes, in vivid light and shadow. If Preston bought her, he would have his money's worth. There was no doubting that. He'd envy the man, taking that to bed with him every night.

Cleavenger fell asleep at last. Rats skittered and whistled in the walls. A numb stillness spread blanketlike over the settlement. Some hours after dark a wagon raced north, traces rattling, hooves pounding, and some man hoorawing in the night. After that the silence intensified.

He awoke suddenly, startled and frightened. He sat up on the mattress, with no clear idea where he was or what had wakened him.

Then he heard the screaming, a woman's outraged cries inside this building, mixed with yells of pain and abuse.

Foye swung out of bed, pulled on his pants and boots. Bare-chested, and carrying his coiled bullwhip for no good reason, he ran out into the hall.

The door to the little room where he'd left Lucretia Borgia chained to a wall stud stood open. He ran to the doorway and stopped abruptly, as if someone had struck him in the chest with a pole.

A candle glowed on a nightstand beside the cot. Preston Vernon was sprawled on the floor, writhing, twisted in a knot, his arms folded over his stomach.

On the cot Lucretia Borgia was crouched, her calico dress twisted and rolled up under her armpits. When she recognized Cleavenger, she slapped her dress down.

Foye stared for the space of one long beat, locked immobile. In that instant he realized what had happened. He saw the sale aborted, his chances at wealth destroyed a-borning.

"No." The word burst across his lips. He felt sick to his stomach. He wanted nothing more than to vomit. He said, "What happened?" Even when he didn't need to ask, did not even want to know.

Lucretia Borgia stared up at him. "He come in here an' tried to mount me."

On the floor Vernon Preston twisted, his face contorted in pain and dismay. "Got a right," he moaned. "Got ever' right. Goin' to buy her in the mornin' . . .

Got a right to . . . ride her first. . . . Got a right to know what I'm buyin'. . . ."

Foye bit back the sickness. He glared down at Lucretia Borgia. "What the hell you doin'?"

Lucretia Borgia gazed at the slaver coldly. "Ain't no man, white or black, what gits in my pretty an' I don't want him to."

Foye was really afraid he was going to throw up. He shook his head, near tears. "Damn you, you might of kilt him."

"Might of," she agreed in a flat, righteous tone. "But if'n I did, he come askin' for it."

XXIV

By late afternoon of that day Foye Cleavenger forgot his rage and disappointment over the collapse of his sale of the Falconhurst wench to Vernon Preston. He had set out from the village of Preston Corners, still moaning in black agony. The world seemed bleak and hopeless even though he knew he could sell this Falconhurst-bred bitch in New Orleans, and for a sizable profit, because he also knew how far away the Crescent City was and how much could go wrong in the hot miles that stretched emptily ahead of him.

Until this morning when he found Vernon writhing in agony on that back-room floor and realized he had lost all chance of consummating the sale, he'd not even suspected how eager he was to complete it. Five thousand dollars in cash. Aye, God! In his hand! There was a bate of black flesh between here and Louisiana's auction stages that a man could purchase at bargain rates when he had unlimited cash to work with. Now, with that sale lost, he barely had food money. He'd be forced to palm off one of his best black studs soon if he were to survive and keep going. He could get good money for the Falconhurst woman in New Orleans, but he could also come damn near starving between here and there.

By the time the coffle had trudged its grudging,

molasses-slow ten miles, and they approached 'a new backwoods settlement, Cleavenger glimpsed the first crudely lettered signs that set his heart to slugging in his rib cage and lifted his dejected mind from his financial fiasco back at Preston Corners.

He slumped in the saddle, reading that first poster:

**NIGGER WRESTLING!
NO HOLDS BARRED!
AT REMICK, ALA.**

Foye grinned and licked at his mustached lips with his tongue. Excitement and anticipation welled up in him. God knew, he was a sporting man, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than bare-knuckled, bare-chested—and sometimes bare-assed—fighting between two primed blacks, oiled and tempered and trained and honed to meanness. Sometimes those bastards fought to the death. God knew, that was when a man got his money's worth. The blacks were like pit bulls, or banty gamecocks, refusing to back off or to admit defeat. Only death ended a fight like that. It was as if once the hatreds were moiled and simmered and brought to boiling inside the fighters, they could not stop, and they could not be stopped, except by death. Only he had never seen anybody try to stop such a contest. No, sir. Nigger fighting was a sport a man never forgot. And sometimes he made his own killing—in wagers. In the heat and fury and passion, men had been known to pledge their farms.

He booted his mount and plodded along in the wake of his coffle, recalling the high excitement of those fights he'd witnessed, from Charleston to Natchez. He'd once watched a Negro chew another's nose right off his face, the blood gushing all over them. Another had dug his opponent's eye out, just jabbed in his fingers and dug the eyeball free while the screaming victim choked at him, clawed at him, and battered at him helplessly.

Ahead he saw another sign—NEGRO WRESTLING!—and a mile farther along the trail, one more. He felt his

anticipation building in a kind of empty-bellied anxiety. He stared at his pack, wishing mightily that he owned just one male specimen healthy and strong enough that he could enter, even in the preliminary matches. There were always openings, and an owner was paid fifty dollars, win or lose. And a man could bet against his own entry; there wasn't any law against picking up a few bucks that way either.

He shook his head. He had nothing to offer this trip. Nothing. His animals were puny, scrubby, sickly, and, he admitted to himself, suffering from malnutrition. Nobody would take one of them seriously. They sure as hell wouldn't pay cash to see any of his starvelings fight.

He made camp less than two miles outside Remick, Alabama, planning to be up and in town before noon the next day. As closely as he could figure, the next day was Saturday. He was almost certain it was. Those posters looked fresh, and they were always set out toward the end of the week to whet back-country appetites.

He slept only restlessly, looking forward to an exciting day in town.

Remick boasted something more than most of the pig-track settlements through which he passed. A main street of red-brick pavement marked the east-west city limits. Huge old oaks grew in the parkways along the street. A few two-storied homes sat in spacious yards, but Remick was a sawmill town; anyone downwind knew this at once.

Foye let his blacks plod down the middle of the street. People came out to stare; dogs barked until he cracked his whip over their bristled backs. The business area was compact: a county courthouse, a few stores, a restaurant and hotel, a couple of saloons.

Foye located the site of the promised Negro wrestling at once. A hand-lettered sign akin to those posted on the trail sat in the window of Sam Baylor's Tavern.

A charged crackling of electricity already hung over the somnolent little town. Fine carriages, runabouts, buggies, carts, flatbed wagons, and saddle horses lined

the curbs. Business was brisk. It was Saturday, all right, and the country folk were gathered from the entire surrounding area.

Taking no chances, Foye reigned in before Sam Baylor's Tavern. Hoisting himself up in his saddle, he called, "Hallo in there. Is today the nigger wrestling?"

Men crowded in the doorway, carrying their beer. A large, sandy-haired man in soiled apron and whipcord trousers pushed his way to the batwings. "Today is Saturday, all right, Mister," he said. He peered at the coffle resting in the sun-struck street. "You got a nigger you want to enter?"

"Not this time, suh." Foye shook his head. "More interested in getting down a few substantial bets—"

"Always got them as willing to accommodate you, suh."

"What I'm looking for is a barracoon where I can pen up my blacks for the day, an' if all goes well, for tonight too," Foye said.

"We got no barracoons here," Sam Baylor said. "County jail ain't but one cell. Doubt the sherriff would accommodate you."

Another man said, "Why don't you try the livery stable? Block over beyond them stores yonder. They got no pens, but I happen to know they got cleats in the studding so's you can chain-link your animals."

"Sounds satisfactory," Foye said. He lifted his hat and bowed slightly. "I shall look forward to joining you gentlemen then, as soon as I've tended to my train."

"Just bring money," Sam Baylor called after him, laughing.

Foye Cleavenger cracked his whip and the coffle plodded forward again. He turned them north at the first side street and herded them toward the town livery stable, a vast, unpainted barn shaded by a scrubby chinaberry tree.

The stablemaster wanted five dollars to stall the coffle, but Foye managed to haggle him down to two dollars for the night, promising to water his animals and

clean up after them himself. When this transaction was effected to his satisfaction, he dismounted from his horse, stabled it, and walked out into the sunlight with the livery operator. "Reckon you could use a spry black boy to throw hay and clean up 'round here? Got a real bargain I could let you have."

"I don't need no slave to feed and tend. Jesus. They mo' costive than horses. Sick all the time. Money you spend on doctors. Food. No, sir. Anybody owns a slave is a fool, an' from what I seen, the owner is the slave."

"Now, how in hell you figure that?"

The livery man laughed. "Look at you. You free? Or is you a slave to them blacks in there? What they need? What they want? How they comin' on?"

"They make me some money."

"Ain't made you so much you don't need extry cash so's you try to sell a black to me."

"Ain't that I strapped for cash," Foye said. "Just that I wanted all I could scrape up. I'm a sportin' man, myself. Figure I know black flesh better'n most. Gives me an advantage when I'm bettin' at nigger wrestling. I can look at a nigger and see a lot of things ordinary laymen just never do catch on to."

"Son of a gun." The lean man stared at Foye admiringly. "Reckon you can at that, studyin' 'em and sellin' 'em and raisin' 'em like you do."

Foye smiled. "I couldn't stay in business long if I could be fooled by nigger flesh." He glanced toward the downtown. "Don't know of nobody 'round here needs a slave, eh?"

The man shook his head. "Ain't heard of nobody. Hell, I don't know of nobody in this town owns any slaves. Ole Sam Baylor got a couple blacks workin' for him over at the saloon, but I've heard they're freedmen. An' he pays 'em salary and found."

"You hear of anybody, you let 'em know I'll be over at the saloon all afternoon."

The man laughed. "You'll see everybody who might be in the market, Mister. Most every man for a radius of

ten miles will be at Sam Baylor's for the fights. Hear they brought in a couple of big black bucks all the way from Mobile."

Foye nodded, already striding away in the blaze of sunlight toward Main Street. He felt the excitement building in him. Damn, if only he had enough cash to lay down some worthwhile bets. It made him want to cry to miss an opportunity like this.

XXV

Foye Cleavenger had never before seen so much money amassed in one place as was stacked in careless piles along the mahogany bar at Sam Baylor's Tavern. A prim-looking man who someone said was a banker was toting up the parcels of coins. The double eagles gleamed dully in the lamplight, each round of gold worth about twenty dollars.

Foye felt the excitement building around him. His own stomach muscles tightened, like someone twisting wire already taut to snapping. He ordered corn whiskey and a schooner of beer and found a place to sit against a wall, where he could watch the exhilaration rise like a tide thundering in upon a shore. A man labored hard all week. His women and his church kept him hard to his furrow. Moments of release like this were rare, and a man wanted to let himself go, and nothing so stirred his blood as watching two black animals fight until they were bloodied, unconscious, or dead.

Men and boys kept straggling in all morning. There was a single topic of conversation—the coming fight and money to be wagered on it. Most fed themselves amply at the free-lunch counter, a wide table crammed with breads, meats, and cheeses. The clients piled boiled ham and sliced pork shoulder slices on slabs of freshly baked

bread and washed it all down with beer, which cost a nickel a schooner. Foye gorged upon the food, eating constantly all morning until he was too chary-stomached to hold another scrap. He grinned to himself and belched. A man sure got the feeling in Remick, Alabama, that he was passing through at least a suburb of paradise.

Eating, or lounging back with their belt buckles loosened, the customers settled down to drinking corn whiskey served by the amazon black woman named Coffee. Somebody was always yelling for Coffee, and she responded swiftly, grinning widely and plowing through the clotting masses of men like an oceangoing scow.

Cleavenger watched the black waitress, fascinated. He listened to her polite yet barbed bantering with the white men. Christ, he wished that his Falconhurst black, that damned Lucretia Borgia who so far had brought him nothing but trouble, was more like this Coffee wench. Didn't hurt a woman like that to be easy with white men, to go along with them. Hell, it was a way of life, and it seemed to him he could get a lot more for Borgia if she were loosey-goosey like Coffee. Hell, they looked to be about the same age. Coffee was twenty or thirty pounds heavier than Lucretia Borgia, a colossal amazon of a woman, with rounded hips and massive tits, but like Lucretia Borgia, Coffee carried her flesh and her weight well. Also, like Borgia, Coffee's laugh made her beautiful.

Foye glanced toward the tavern clock on the wall. It was closing on high noon, time for the action to begin. As Coffee swept past, he caught her arm. "When's the nigger wrestlin' start?"

She laughed at him, hardly slowing down. "When the niggers git here, Mista."

Foye tried to relax; the other men were shouting and talking around him, satisfied to wait. It was just that it had been such a long time for him, and he had whetted his appetite for a real battle. And, too, he had decided to bluff a few hundred in bets. He had the advantage on these rubes. He knew black flesh and they didn't. He could spot flaws in a fighter they would never see. And

if he lost, he'd welch on the bets and clear out. If he won, he made a killing.

There was already much betting going on as the deadline approached and the customers swilled down more corn whiskey. No Negro wrestling would ever be worth the name until the spectators were soused and marinated in corn squeezings.

He did not take part in any of the wagering yet. He was too smart for that. He wanted to see the gladiators before he put any money down or bluffed a bet. He saw, too, that most of the smarter sporting crowd took no part in this shoutingfest of sucker gambling. The smart money waited to view the two heavyweight blacks due to arrive, the bartender kept saying, at any moment, but not yet on the property.

Lookouts were placed in the streets and at the city limits to watch for the arrival of the fight promoter, a Mr. Symons of New Orleans, who was due to arrive with his fighters momentarily.

A fat, drunken man stood up. "Hell, no fightin' yet? Where-at's this big promoter feller and his niggers? I 'on't see any fightin' yet."

There was a murmur that swept over the crowd and bounced back from the mirrored wall behind the bar. Sam Baylor held his arms above his head. "Now, fellows. Jus' relax."

"Yeah. The more we relax and the more corn we drink, the better off you are, Sam Baylor," somebody yelled.

"I drink much more corn whiskey an' I'm going to be so relaxed I'll sleep through the Second Coming."

"Now, I know Mr. Symons. I done business with him before. All you fellows as been here to the other fights we had know that Mr. Symons is a man of his word. A man of integrity. We'se had some humdinger fights right out back in our arena. An' it's all ready, an' Mr. Symons will show up soon. I vouch for that."

The tavern was now packed from wall to wall with milling men and boys, all shouting and talking at the

same time. Coffee was the only one able to navigate in the crush with ease. Behind the bar, Baylor had pressed two extra bartenders into service, dispensing drinks. Everybody was still drinking and still good-natured, though growing testy when the hands on the Seth Thomas wall clock moved well past the noon hour.

There was no alerting cry from the lookouts, but suddenly a buzz of anticipation hummed through the assemblage. And then the hum was followed by a stunned silence.

Foye got up from the wall and made his way through the mob to the bar. He was afraid he had consumed too much corn and gone temporarily deaf in the strange stillness.

Behind the bar, Sam Baylor stood with a harried-looking man in top hat, broadcloth jacket, and frilled shirt with string tie and gold studs. Foye knew this man to be Mr. Symons, the promoter from New Orleans, on sight.

Baylor pulled a box up close to the bar and stepped up on it. He took up a bung starter like a club but leaned against it in a devil-may-care way. And he was smiling. Still, one could feel there was no good news about to be imparted here.

"Men, we got some bad news."

"Whure-at's the niggers? Where's the fightin' niggers?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Sam Baylor said. "This here is Mr. Symons of New Orleans, standin' beside me here. Now, Mr. Symons brought two of his best fighters from New Orleans. But maybe I best let Mr. Symons hisself tell you what happened on the way up here."

Baylor allowed Mr. Symons to step up on the box. Baylor stood beside the sweated and agonized promoter, still tapping his left palm with the bung starter.

"Men," Symons said. He shook his head. "I cain't tell you how sorry and regretful I am about what happened. I was bringing you two of my best boys. Careless and Ole Bubba. Any of you men who have ever been to

wrestlin' fights around New Orleans know that Careless and Bubba are veterans. They is killed and they is maimed, but they is still up an' fightin'."

"Let 'em fight," somebody yelled. There was entreaty and a pathetic eagerness as well as threat in the cry.

"Well, they is mean niggers. We has to keep 'em mean to keep 'em honed to fight. I shouldn't of done it, but I was tryin' to hurry, and so instead of bringing two wagons with separate cages, I put Careless an' Ole Bubba in a single cage.

"I was hurried and didn't pay no attention. Heard 'em snarling and snappin' at each other. But didn't think too much of it. Figured they'd be honed sharp to fight when we got here to Remick, Alabama. You fellows is the best fight audience anywhere, an' Mr. Baylor an' me look forward to givin' you the best nigger-fighting anywhere. . . .

"Well, them two blacks—Careless an' Ole Bubba—got to fightin' in the cage. They got to rollin' and twistin' on the floor. Bubba got a choke holt on Careless's throat. When Careless couldn't breathe no more, he bit Old Bubba's testicles—"

"Bit him in the nuts?" somebody yelled.

"Right in the nuts. Course Bubba screamed and let go the choke holt. But that nigger Careless, he chewed Ole Bubba's testicles to a pulp. Chewed until he bled, and then kept on chewing. He wouldn't a-stopped, I reckon, if I hadn't hit him across the head with a club. They out there in the back, but they can't be no fight."

"Why not?"

"My God, man. Ole Bubba won't fight no more. He just crouches there, his hands pressed against his groin, a-shakin' his head."

"Hell, why'n't you make him fight?"

"Fight? My God, man, we'uns can't even make Ole Bubba stand up. . . . He just kneels, cryin', an' a-holdin' hisself with both hands. He's in no shape to fight."

Foye felt wild with frustration and disappointment.

He felt as if he had been robbed and left sprawled in an alley. He wanted to cry aloud in protest. He stood there, looking around and shaking his head. "They cain't do that," he whispered. "Gawd almighty, they cain't do that."

He heard Symons speaking again. "Careless is a good fighter, and he fit enough to scrap. He 'bout six-one or -two, weigh maybe one eighty, one eighty-five. What we willing to do is match him against the best black any of you men can produce. What we do is, does Careless win, the black fighter's owner still gets half the purse, after Mr. Baylor's expenses, and does your man whup my boy Careless, why, it's winner take all. . . . I regret what has happened, but I don't think I can be any fairer than that."

"How about it?" Baylor called. "Any of you men got a nigger fighter you want to put up against Mr. Symons's boy Careless? Your boy don't even have to win to git yo'self a nice purse."

There was heated exchanges all around the room, but there was also one certain consensus: Nobody in Remick, Alabama, owned a black they'd care to match with a professional wrestler.

Sam Baylor leaned forward toward his bar and shouted across it to Foye Cleavenger. "How 'bout you, brother? You, there. The slave trader. You got a coffle of blacks penned down at the livery stables. Ain't you got a fighter amongst them?"

"Make yourself a nice purse, win or lose, sir," Mr. Symons said in an encouraging tone.

Foye felt sick at his stomach, but he could only shake his head regretfully. "Not this trip. Usual, I have only fine specimen. But I don't even have a bozal that I could throw in there against a fighter like your Careless."

"Hundred dollars," Symons said, sweating.

Foye winced. "Hundred dollars won't do me no good an' Careless kills my nigger. Then I got a hundred dollars and a black corpse on my hands."

The men around Foye crowded him, raging. "What you scairt of? You got a nigger, bring him down here."

"Whure-at's the nigger-fightin'?" a man yelled from the bar.

"You don't bring in a nigger, there ain't a-goin' to be no fight at all." There was heartbreak and accusation in the man's tone. He thrust his face toward Foye as if this entire fiasco were his fault.

"Look." Foye sweated, shaking his head. "Ain't nothin' I'd rather do than bring in a nigger to fight. An' I had one, I'd do it. But I ain't got nothin' but sickly men an' saplin's. They little, scrawny, knob-kneed varmints. Folks laugh 'em out of the ring an' I put one in against Careless." He tried to laugh. "Hell, I ain't got nothin' this trip what could whup Ole Bubba with his nuts chewed off."

There was a slight instant of relaxing as a laugh rose among the men close enough in the press of flesh to hear what the slaver said about this own pack.

Foye tried to take the curse and the burden and the attention off himself with another self-deprecatory joke. "You know when a slave trader runs down his own stock, he ain't got nothin' worth fighting."

A sour growl spread across the room and returned, growing in volume. "We got to do something," Sam Baylor said to Mr. Symons. "These are good ordinary people mostly, but when they tanked up on corn whiskey and primed for a nigger-fightin', they can be mighty nasty."

"I'll stay here with you as long as I can," Mr. Symons said. He studied the men across the bar nervously. "But I can't take a chance on havin' my property destroyed, or anything happenin' to my fighters."

"I understand that." Sam Baylor nodded. "But these men may well mob us an' we don't come up with something."

Symons shifted the onus entirely from his own shoulders by declaring, "I swear I never saw a town the size

of Remick didn't have a few big black bucks, especially a sawmill town."

"Nobody 'round here has many niggers. We got some blacks workin' at the sawmill, but they don't live close to town."

Symons spread his hands. "Well, if you got nothin' heavyweight to offer, we'll just have to call it off."

"I've sold tickets. 'Most a hundred dollars' worth. An' even them ain't bought their tickets yet, they likely to be the meanest."

At that moment Coffee tried to reach the service bar with her tray above her head. A white man, whooping, caught at her, and she almost casually thrust up under his chin with the palm of her free hand. The man went down as if he'd suddenly fainted. The big woman moved on to the service bar without even glancing back. Foye stared at her, mouth agape.

Sweated, Foye thrust himself between the men ahead of him until he was pressed hard against the bar. He stepped up on the brass rail and leaned across the bar's damp surface, arms extended toward Symons and Sam Baylor. "Maybe I got an answer," he said in a croaking voice.

"Christ knows, I hope so," Baylor said. He and Symons leaned closer, hopefully.

"You fellows in a bind. How much you willin' to pay to git out of it?" Foye said.

"I already tole you, suh, a hundred dollars," Symons said.

"Maybe I could add a hundred to that," Baylor said. "It'd be worth it to me to avoid wreckage and bad feelin's."

"This here is my idea," Foye said. "Your woman Coffee. She's a big, tough gal. I just seen her lay out a man with the heel of her hand. Well, I got myself a real prime black woman in my coffle. She's the best specimen I own at the moment. She ain't as big as Coffee, but she's close enough to be in her class. I could bring my Borgia over here. We could set up a real bout. Out in the

arena—only somethin' they ain't ever seen before—twixt my woman Borgia and your Coffee." He jerked his head toward the snarling mob behind him. "They'd like that."

Symons was scowling. "If your woman is a prime as you say, why would you risk gettin' her marked or scarred for two hundred dollars?"

"Yeah." Baylor shook his head. "Coffee is worth plenty to me. We'd both be riskin' valuable animals."

Foye grinned, sweating. "That's up to you. Seems to me you're riskin' a hell of a lot more tryin' to call off the fightin' entirely today."

"That's God's truth," Baylor agreed.

"It might work," Symons said. He touched at his mustache with the backs of his fingers. "I never seed a real sluggin' match twixt two black bitches myself. Not professional. Not in a ring."

"Hell, you could even charge extry," Foye said. "Run the price up."

"Looks like I got no choice," Baylor said. He continued to peer at Foye Cleavenger. "You must be hard up for money, brother."

"I can always use cash," Cleavenger admitted. "But that ain't it. That ain't why I'm doin' it."

Baylor's mouth twisted. "Don't tell me it's a favor to me and Symons."

"It's a favor to me," Foye said. His head reeled and he had difficulty speaking without slurring the words. The charge he felt inside was almost sensual. He was aroused at the idea, forcing two women to fight in the mud in front of a howling mob of white men. Who in their right minds, in a civilized world, would think of something like that? "I'm a sportin' man . . . I all het up to see a good bloody nigger fight. . . . You fellows hand over your two hundred in cash an' you got a good wagerin' match of black amazons to offer. . . ."

XXVI

Miz Lucretia Borgia slumped against the slab-plank wall of the livery stable. She could see horses placed in stalls about the huge old barn; she could smell them, as she could smell the tired and sick and unwashed black bodies around her, snubbed down like animals, and she was one of them.

She writhed in inner agony, her head up and her eyes fixed on a small slit in the high cypress roofing. She thanked whatever gods controlled her destiny for the minuscule kindness of providing her a turban for her head. One of the older men, named Timon, who said he had spent his life growing kitchen gardens for a white family until they could no longer afford to keep him, had given her an oversized red-and-black-checked bandanna. It was the ugly kind of kerchief men used to wipe away sweat in the fields, but when she had entwined it about her head, it served as a turban. A turban restored a modicum of her lost self-esteem. She felt a little more like Miz Lucretia Borgia of Falconhurst Plantation.

She shook her head, consciously dislodging the thought of the farm where she had spent so many years of her life and where until these recent days had expected to die and to be buried. It helped nothing to look back, to yearn for home. She was black, a slave, a chattel. She

was an animal, like the horses snuffling and pawing in their stalls, and she had no home, not anymore.

She could smell the slaver as soon as the slaver entered the public stables. It was quiet in here; the caretaker had departed over two hours earlier for the Negro-fighting in the arena behind Sam Baylor's Tavern.

She straightened slightly, realizing as soon as she saw Cleavenger maneuvering his way cautiously toward his coffle that he was drunk. Her mouth twisted. She was accustomed to white men's drinking and to their getting staggering drunk. It was just that Cleavenger was such a vile-looking little toad that he was as ugly as an ogre when he toppled against stall boards and set himself before he entered the area where his pack was chained.

"These heah people, they hungry," Miz Lucretia said. They had been complaining to her, pleading with her to broach the matter with the slaver as soon as he returned.

He took his coiled whip from his saddle horn and staggered into the pen. He stood, legs braced apart, and stared at the blacks. "Hungry, eh? Well, fuck 'em. Nobody eats till nightfall. . . . What the hell . . . you blacks ain't done nothin' all mawnin' but sit on your asses. . . . I'll feed you when I'm ready. And by god-damn, I don't want to hear no more 'bout it."

As he worked he struggled with the locks, releasing the chain about Lucretia Borgia's waist from the heavy center line. When she was freed from the others, he linked the chain about his wrist and locked it. He yanked on it, jerking Lucretia Borgia forward. "On your feet, bitch. Let's go."

Instinctively, or perhaps only perversely because she despised the ugly drunken man so deeply, she resisted.

Raging, Foye shook out the whip and cracked it within inches of her face. Even staggering drunk he was expert with the lash. His lips curled away from his mouth in savage laughter. "I could of laid your eye open, bitch, an' I'd a-wanted. Next time I will, less'n you up on your feet afore I coil this blacksnake to strike again."

Toothless Vahrina, squatting beside Lucretia, caught

her arm in wiry talons, whispering frantically, "Go with him. He git crazy an' he drunk. I's seen him kill blacks with that whip when he drinking."

Lucretia Borgia levered herself to her feet. Foye laughed and nodded. "That's better," he said.

"You're drunk," she told him.

He had reeled toward the gate of the pen. Now he set himself and jerked his head around, peering at her over his shoulder. "All right. Goddamn it. So I'm drunk. Ain't the first drunk. Ain't the last. Ain't even the best damn drunk I ever been on. But they is one thing about it, bitch, that's like all the other drunks I ever been on, or ever will be on. Ain't none of your fuckin' business. . . . You jus' come with me and keep your mouth shut an' do what I tells you. Maybe fo' once you stay out'n trouble."

She let him lead her out of the pen, but as he stumbled ahead of her toward the front door, she caught an upright just long enough to unbalance him and send him staggering to one knee.

He leaped up, raising to use the leaded whip handle as a club if she approached him while he was off balance. But she only stood with her hands on her hips, gazing at him, mouth twisted. "Where you takin' me?"

She could not have spoken any other four words to enrage him more. That she would dare to question him, his motives, or his rights, stirred every spark of white supremacy tamped inside him.

Trembling, he turned and set his legs. Sweat ran down from his hat into his eyes and along his dust-tinged cheeks. His hands shaking, he gripped the whip, ready to lash out at her. "Oh, you damn nigger wench. Don't you ever question me like that. I want you to know where I takin' you, I tell you. Ain't none of your goddamn business where I'm takin' you. But I tells you this much. You don't cost me five thousand dollars back yonder in Preston Corners with your high-an'-mighty airs. Too good to let a white man crawl your pretty, an' him

wantin' to buy you. Well, you goin' git me a little part of that money back today—an' whether you do or not, you goin' to regret the way you robbed me of a fortune."

It seemed to Lucretia Borgia that the streets were crowded on that hot Saturday afternoon. It was more nightmare than reality, yet it seemed to her that people lined the curbs as if awaiting a parade. She heard their scornful laughter, and, sick at her stomach, she realized they were laughing at her and the drunken man leading her as if she were a stubborn dog.

Children ran into the street. They pointed and screamed at the drunken man and the black woman. Women chased down the tads, dragging them away, frightened by Cleavenger's drunken swearing and snarling.

Once, lunging at a tormentor, he stumbled to his knees. The quiet street echoed with raging laughter, pitiless and cold as spittle.

Miz Lucretia Borgia closed her eyes against the nightmare of reality. She put her head back and allowed herself to be towed along the thoroughfare at the end of the chain. She looked neither right nor left. Everywhere sprouted those hateful white faces, twisted out of shape with savage laughter. She felt the burn of shame, as if indeed she had descended into hell, from which there was no return, no escape.

The waves of laughter, the growling snarls from her master, roiled and swirled inside her brain. All she could think was that this was cruelty beyond anything she could endure.

"Oh, Gawd," she whispered deep inside her. "Oh, Gawd help me."

She didn't expect help. At that moment she was certain there was no God. Her God was a slave trader named Foye Cleavenger, who dragged her through the streets, ridiculed and scorned. It was one thing to be part of a coffle of black slaves. She was black. She was a slave. She admitted these truths now, without reserve. She had climbed high, and she had lived in false pride

and vanity, and the gods had ripped it away. They had shown her what she was. She was part of a coffle, straggling through towns, hated and despised. But in a coffle she was one of many. Here she was nothing but the figure of scorn, half dragged in the dust by a drunken white man.

Biting back sickness, she closed her mind to the people who came running from all directions, to the laughter that followed her across the paved Main Street. She escaped only when Foye Cleavenger led her into a narrow alleyway.

She opened her eyes, seeing the barrels of refuse, the deep ruts, the discards everywhere, the six-foot-high plank fencing, with the rage of male voices rising beyond it.

Foye stopped at a gate in the fence and rapped upon it with the leaded whip handle. It was opened by a sweated man who said, "Took you long enough. These people are gettin' to hell out of hand."

Foye shrugged. He took a couple of loops on the chain to control Lucretia better with shorter halter. He led her inside and they slammed the gate behind them, locking it.

Lucretia Borgia's natural curiosity overcame even her fear and revulsion. She had never seen a place like this in all her life before. She had not even known such an enclosure existed. Foye jerked on her chain, leading her deeper into this crowded arena, and she followed, wide-eyed.

The area behind Sam Baylor's Tavern, and opening into it at one end, had been boarded up and provided with plank bleacher seats in a semicircular amphitheater with a roped-in mud slough as its heart. From this core the tiers of plank seats rose upward until men were sitting even with the top of the enclosure fence. Men and boys occupied every seat, and many stood around in every open space.

Lucretia Borgia's nose wrinkled in disgust. The unpleasant smells assaulted her as Cleavenger led her be-

tween two tiers of seats. She smelled the rancid bodies of sweated, close-packed men who seldom bathed. The sour smell of whiskey hung like a thick miasma over everything, along with the blue haze of cigar smoke. She smelled spilled beer and even vomitus before they reached a small cleared space near the roped center ring.

A shout went up from the throng when they glimpsed Cleavenger leading the slave woman into sight.

Mr. Symons and a harried Sam Baylor awaited them. Beyond the two white men a heavy-shouldered black woman stood, stolid and implacable and disinterested.

"This your woman?" Symons said. He shook his head. "She ain't nowhere near as big as Baylor's Coffee."

Deadly serious, the sweated Foye peered from Borgia to Coffee and back again. He shook his head. "Sumbitch," he said. "My Borgia looked kinda hefty till I brung her up next to Coffee."

"It'll have to do. It'll have to do," Baylor said before there could be any further discussion. "We don't git this thing started, we goin' to have ruinous rampagin' we cain't control. We have trouble like that, the sheriff going to close me up, surer'n hellfire."

"It's going to be all right," Symons said. He jerked his head around, addressing Foye. "Your woman know what to do?"

Foye shrugged. "I ain't told her. But she know to do what I tell her." He yanked Miz Lucretia Borgia forward. "See that black wench yonder? I done collected two hundred dollars from these here gentlemen for you to fight with her out in that ring yonder."

Lucretia Borgia shuddered. She straightened. She shook her head. "I ain't fightin' that woman . . . I ain't fightin' nobody out there."

Symons laughed. "She's a sharp-talkin' nigger, ain't she?"

"She uppity, all right," Foye agreed. "But she do what I tell her." He shook the whip in her face. "I goin' unchain you. We goin' put you in that ring out there. You goin' fight. An' you don't, big Coffee there goin' rip

your tits off and shove 'em up your ass. You fight all right. Or I bullwhip you. Right here in front of these people. You stand up to me in front of these here white gentlemen and I whips your ass till it bleeds."

"I ain't fightin' like no animal," Lucretia Borgia said between clamped teeth.

"You is an animal, you black bitch. What the hell you think you is? I tell you this. You gits out there and you fights that Coffee gal there, or I drags you out there, I rips your dress off and I whups you—in front of all these white men—jus' like you an animal. . . . I got two hundred dollars to put on a show—what kind of show is up to you."

The two black women were led into the ring. A raging growl of sensual excitement rose as if from a single gargantuan throat.

Mr. Symons made his announcement as quickly as possible, and then got out of the ring. Holding his top hat, he retreated as far as he could, until he stood only a few steps from the alley gate.

When Symons departed the mud ring, Baylor and Cleavenger thrust their amazon fighters toward each other and retired to opposite sides of the slough.

The two women toppled into each other. The crowd screamed wildly. Lucretia Borgia threw up her hands to ward off the huge body.

"Don't you hit me in the tits," Coffee warned.

"Ain't gone hit you no way. You let me alone," Lucretia said.

"You a damn fool, gal," Coffee said, circling her, dragging her feet in the ankle-deep mud. "You fight or I kills you."

"What you got 'gainst me?"

"Nothin' . . . but I means to live and do well. . . . Done found out long time ago. One way to do that . . . do what these white men say. . . . They say beat the shit out of you. That's what I means to do."

Suddenly she lunged toward Lucretia, but Miz Lucre-

tia, even in the thick mud, leaped agilely aside. The men began to yell at them to mix it up.

Coffee closed in, circling her. As soon as Lucretia sidestepped and was off balance, Coffee lunged forward, striking her full with the heel of her big hand.

Lucretia Borgia staggered. Her head spun and the whole arena skidded madly about her head. She saw Coffee coming toward her again, striking with both arms at will, skillful and deadly. Her fists landed on both sides of Lucretia's head and she staggered. She felt a glancing blow yank the checkered bandanna from her head. She saw the fabric flutter to the mud and disappear, churned into it.

"Make that little bitch fight," somebody yelled.

"This ain't no fight. This jus' a plain beatin'. Fight, wench."

XXVII

"That black woman of yourn. She kindly hard to rile up," a man yelled into Foye Cleavenger's ear.

Foye snarled over his shoulder. "That black woman is a mule-stubborn bitch."

He leaned across the rope and cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted into the din. "Fight, damn you, Borgia. You heah me, Borgia? You fight or I gonna whup you bleedy."

As if from some vast distance, Miz Lucretia heard the chanting of the spectators, the raging demands that she fight back. She continued to back away, refusing to take part in these barbaric rites. They would have to kill her.

Prodded by the fury of the angered mob, Coffee tried to rouse her submissive opponent. Coffee cursed at Lucretia Borgia. She taunted, vilified, and insulted her. "Yo' a whore, gal. A scared whore." She snarled lewd and vicious and vituperative epithets like spittle while she reigned blows around Lucretia's head and shoulders.

But Lucretia refused to fight back. She reeled under Coffee's flailing fists. She retreated under the impact of those blows. She covered her head with her arms to protect herself from Coffee's stinging attack, but if she retaliated at all, it was only halfheartedly, and then only to keep the bigger woman at arm's length.

She managed to evade some of those swinging hay-makers. It was Coffee's big open hand in stinging slaps that confused and hurt her most.

Sam Baylor prowled the area outside the ropes, smiling at the spectacle. Negro women fighting. My God, what a sensational idea! He could read in the crazed, sweated faces in tiers around him what a fantastic promotion this was. This kind of battling could never replace the bloody drama of huge black men trying to kill or maim each other with bare fists. But for variety and change of pace, it would be a moneymaker. He could always sell out such an extravaganza as long as he could keep the law off his back.

He puffed on his cigar. That his Negress was badly pummeling the other woman added more than a little to his relish of the contest. He liked the way Coffee handled herself, the willing way she threw herself into the fray. He had known how strong Coffee was. But, watching her now, he marveled at her art, the skill and dexterity in her blows, the way she moved with such agility, even in that mud slough, pursuing the unwilling opponent relentlessly, taking the fight to her, forcing her to react.

Coffee found an opening and struck Lucretia Borgia a looping blow that sent her staggering backward. The crowd raged, screaming in its frenzy, urging her on, begging her to kill.

Losing her balance, Lucretia stumbled and sank to her knees. Coffee set herself and then lunged through the air to topple the falling woman. At the last second Lucretia managed to roll aside, and Coffee landed face-first in the soup of mud and clay. Savage laughter spewed out over them, and a few men even shouted encouragement to Borgia, admiring her agility if despising her reluctance to put on a good show by fighting back. "That's the way, Borgia! Fight her, Borgia! Push her face in the mud."

"Make her eat that mud, gal."

"Come on, Coffee, don't let that wench get the best of you. Go get her, Coffee. . . ."

Coffee pushed herself up, blowing and shaking her head to dislodge the crust of clay. The humiliation of being plunged into the mud face-first enraged Coffee. For the first time, she fought for some reason other than her anxiety to please her white master. She pounced after Lucretia Borgia in true anger.

As Lucretia Borgia struggled to her feet, Coffee tackled her about the knees and sent her sprawling into the slough. She caught Lucretia's short, crisp hair in her fist and drove her face into the soupy mud. Growling in her throat, she thrust Borgia's face downward, holding it until Lucretia bucked free, mud-caked and gasping for breath.

Coffee caught Lucretia in an armlock about her neck and jerked her head back to her. "You best fight me, gal," Coffee gasped. "Or I gonna kill you."

Lucretia made no attempt to reply. Coffee's arm was cutting off her breath. She broke free, using both hands to pry that lock loose. She lunged away, struggling to retreat in the mud. Infuriated that Borgia could not be goaded into fighting, Coffee sprang upward after her, her arms flailing. Lucretia sidled away and countered the blows as best she could. She felt the flesh of her cheek tear and the blood start. She shook her head and moaned, deep inside.

Coffee's swinging arms toppled her again and Coffee fell upon her. Somehow Lucretia Borgia scrambled free before she was smothered under that heavy body. Their arms, bodies, faces, and scalps were encrusted with mud by now. The only way one fighter could be told from the other was by Coffee's overwhelming size. Their eyes were like holes in clay masks, their hands and arms dripped the stuff when they moved them.

Lucretia tried to wipe the mud from her face and arms, but Coffee grappled her about the waist and dragged her down again. The fluid splashed upward as they landed,

and laughter raged. Lucretia struggled fiercely, but only in an attempt to free herself.

At the ringside Foye Cleavenger shook with frustration. He wept. Once he buckled forward and vomited in his outrage. He sobbed, yelling threats and vilification upon his cowardly fighter. Her calumny reflected on his honor as a civilized southern gentleman, and this was not to be endured. He dragged his sleeve across his mouth, staring at the two women through swollen, red-rimmed eyes. Of course, Coffee's victory was foregone, but Cleavenger swore in anguish and fury. He was damned if he would take his woman out of that fight until she should show spunk enough at least to strike back.

"Damn you, Borgia," he sobbed. "Damn you. Fight. Damn you."

The crowd raged, wavering between exultant pleasure and angered dejection. The fight wore on, slowing as Coffee gasped for breath, her heavy arms tiring as she pummeled Borgia. She kept knocking the smaller woman off her feet. They rolled in the slough, each trying to writhe free. Borgia wanted only to protect herself from further injury, and Coffee wanted to get room enough to use her fists, her open hands, and her fingernails.

They grappled and struggled until they fell almost under the ropes. Men kicked at them, forcing them back into the slough.

Lucretia Borgia broke free and levered herself to her feet, slowly, laboriously. She held her mouth open as wide as she could, gulping in draughts of air into her sored throat. She made panting, half-sobbing noises as she tried to breathe.

For a long moment Coffee stayed propped on her hands and knees, head slumped between her shoulders. She gasped for breath, under the cries and curses of the crowd, and struggled to her feet.

She stared at Lucretia, eyes wild. Crying out in a savage frustration that she could neither destroy her opponent nor force her to fight back, Coffee howled and leaped forward, both hands extended like claws.

"Fight, you bitch," Coffee muttered between her mud-frosted teeth. "Ain't you got no sense? This ain't gonna stop till you fight back."

Lucretia heard her, but only vaguely. She wavered on her feet, blood mixing with the mud where Coffee had clawed her or broken her skin with her stinging, open palms.

Coffee shook her head, sobbing. She grasped the bodice of Lucretia's mud-soaked calico dress and ripped downward.

Every man in the arena came to his feet. A gasp, almost a single sound, raced across the tiers of fascinated faces. Here was an extra added attraction few had anticipated or even dared to hope for. The Borgia woman stood, her high-standing breasts and shapely belly exposed to her pubic hairs.

"No." It was like the helpless, agonized cry of nightmare.

Lucretia Borgia wailed aloud, like a soul lost in torment. Coffee, who had failed to rouse her to anger, now suddenly outraged her, violated her long-embedded sense of propriety and decency, of dignity, of privilege to her own body. Until this instant of public humiliation, she had been a frightened, cowed, and submissive woman wanting only to escape her torment. Now, naked, she knew they would not stop until she was covered with their vile. She could never escape this torment, or these tormentors. There was no way to appeal to their compassion, for they had none. Only she could help herself. Only she could stop them.

She heard the howls, like ululations, the whistles, the admiring cries of the white men: "Lord Gawd, look at them titties. . . . Look at that fuggin' nigger wench . . . built like a brick shithouse, ain't she? . . . Jesus, I didn't know they built niggers that good. . . ."

She stood naked before them. Exposed. Nude. Disgraced. Stripped of innate and deeply ingrained pride and modesty and self-respect.

She heard the pulse and fury of the white men as if

from some remote place. She shivered with shame, but she was galvanized into action, because she knew now that only she could end this malevolent assault upon her person.

She stared at Coffee's contorted face. Coffee hesitated, seeing some of the agony and madness swirling in Lucretia's black eyes.

Lucretia Borgia sobbed aloud once. She had taken enough molestation. She lunged forward, catching Coffee unawares. She drove her fist into Coffee's unguarded solar plexus.

Coffee gasped and buckled forward. Lucretia caught her hair in her fist and jerked her head down as she brought her own knee upward.

The sound of her knee thrust against Coffee's face was a sharp, muffled thud. Coffee's arms flew out wildly and she plunged face-downward.

Lucretia Borgia made a plunge for her and fell on top of Coffee, her knee in her back, pinning her down.

Crouching there, half-naked, her lips folded back in savagery, she beat Coffee on both sides of her head, driving her deeper and pitilessly into the slough.

Lucretia Borgia sobbed as she pommeled the woman beneath her, hating her and all these white people, exhausting her body and her rages, exorcising all those relentless devils harrying her, ripping out of her all the evil she had endured at their hands.

Outside the rope, Sam Baylor stopped as if poled. He was sickened at this sudden turn in the fighting.

Beyond him, Mr. Symons moved slightly away from the gate. As far as he could see, the threat of riot was averted. None of these rednecks could demand more of a fight than this.

When Coffee did not even struggle, her face thrust beneath the mud, Baylor yelled, "Stop it, bitch! Stop it. You'll drown her."

He bounded over the rope and grabbed Lucretia Borgia under her arms, yanking her away. He half hurled her behind him and fell to his knee beside the immobile

Coffee. He caught her and lifted her from the slough. He turned her over, resting her shoulder against his knee. Her nose and mouth bled, but she was breathing. He exhaled in relief. She opened her eyes, but it was a long beat before they focused and she recognized him. She shook her head weakly. "No more. No more."

"No." Baylor tried to smile. "It's over, Coffee."

Foye Cleavenger braced himself against an upright. He stared at the three people in the ring. He seemed suspended in waves of hoarse yelling that went on and on. He could not believe what had happened. He could in no way credit this sudden reversal. He was too stunned at his victory even to speak. He only shook his head back and forth, bemused. Jesus Christ, it was over, and he had won. He had been forced to bet on his own woman, and incredibly, he had won. In Christ's name, he was rich.

He stood there, his knees weak as whey, watching what happened through an occluding cloud.

He saw Sam Baylor stand up and lift both arms, exhorting the mob to be quiet. He heard Sam Baylor bawling out his decision—the Borgia woman was the victor, and that there would be more fights the following Saturday. But by the time he reached this part of his announcement, the place was bedlam; no one listened.

Lucretia Borgia crouched on her knees in the mud. She clutched her torn dress up against her violated body as well as she could. She did not speak. She did not move until Foye Cleavenger entered the ring and looped the chain about her waist and locked it.

XXVIII

Miz Lucretia Borgia staggered to her feet. The whole arena wheeled and skidded about her head. She grabbed the corner upright and held on until the world steadied itself.

Sam Baylor stood outside the ring. He extended a glass of corn whiskey. His voice was kindly. "Drink it down, gal. It'll put life in you."

She took the whiskey, and, holding the ripped and mud-saturated dress against her breasts, she drank. She gave him the glass and thanked him.

"You done good," Baylor told her. "Coffee says to tell you she harbors no feelin' of ill toward you. She sent out one of her dresses that you can wear since she rent yours so bad."

Miz Lucretia nodded and tried to smile to thank him. She was too tired to speak. Because she was covered with wet, crusting mud, Foye Cleavenger carried the calico dress Coffee had given her. He laughed. "Goin' fit you like a tent."

She peered at him. "Gone cover me like a tent too, white man. Ain't that too bad?"

"No call fo' you to be nasty," he said. "Ever' blessed man I met says he ain't never seen anything better-lookin' than you, gal, way you built an' all."

She shrugged and plodded ahead of him. Outside the crowded arena she was able to breathe better; the air was clearer. She closed her mind to the staring white people who lined the long trek back to the livery stable. The hell with them, the hell with all of them. She didn't care what these clowns thought of her; she knew again who she was.

She managed to walk, reeling occasionally and sick at her stomach, as far as the cypress watering trough under the chinaberry tree outside the livery stable. She half-toppled into the long wooden basin, scrubbing fiercely at the mud caked in her hair, mouth, and all the crevices of her body. She stayed there a long time, aware that the torn dress had split and fallen off. She did not care. The water was cold and refreshing; even the green algae growing on the insides of the conduit felt soft and pleasant against her skin.

She was bloody, and once she washed away the caking mud, the tears and contusions on her body bled again. She ached from the top of her head, where that Coffee gal had clutched her hair in her fist, to her ankles, where the mud had resisted every time she tried to step. The whole ugly memory was like a nightmare that persists long after waking. She remembered her humiliation and she shuddered. She was never going to forget. And yet, even with the agony and the rape of her dignity and self-respect, even with the hopelessness of the empty days and nights ahead of her, she could not deny that she felt somehow—if only faintly—better. She had regained something in that ring of mud, a faint glimmering of her old self-confidence, the merest stirring of awareness of what she was inside, of who she was, no matter what they did to her. There were some things they could not take away from her.

Foye Cleavenger tossed her a smelly towel. She caught it, wincing. She would smell worse than a white man after she dried herself, but it could not be helped.

When she stepped from the wooden watering tub, she realized the stablekeeper and some of his cronies had

returned from the fight. They leaned against the barn, staring at her and nudging one another.

She sucked in a sharp breath, then relaxed. The hell with them. She rubbed herself dry as swiftly as she could, threw the towel at the gaping Cleavenger, and grabbed her new dress from him.

Foye had been right. The dress enclosed her like a tent. She wanted to laugh with the pleasure its vastness gave her. She was covered from her shoulders to her feet. With her head up she walked past the men leaning against the barn. She entered the livery stable and walked into the pen, where the other slaves waited submissively.

She stared at them a half-beat, mouth twisted with contempt. Then she fell into a pile of hay and in minutes was asleep.

By eight o'clock the next morning the coffle was on the road west out of Remick, Alabama. Cleavenger proved magnanimous in his new affluence. He brought scrambled eggs, clabber, and corn pone in buckets from the local café the next morning just after dawn. "Eat hearty," he told his blacks. "It's goin' to be a hard day. We got a long way to go."

On the road Cleavenger plodded on his horse beside the slow-moving coffle. In the midst of the blacks Lucretia Borgia walked, her head battered but held high. The chain about her waist acted as a belt for the oversized dress.

Foye talked toward Lucretia as if the other blacks were not present or, like the animals he considered them, understood nothing. He said, "You a beautiful gal, Lucretia Borgia. . . . I seen tanned-skinned white gals a lot darker than you."

She glanced toward him. "You ain't flatterin' me none, tellin' me I looks like a white woman."

"Hell, I ain't! You better-lookin' than any white woman I ever seen." Foye laughed. "And unlike a lot of southron men, I don't prefer black meat to white. Mostly, I like white women. But you got me all stirred up and randy. I

got a ache in my nuts for you that I ain't felt in twenty years."

She frowned, but said nothing. He said, "Hell, gal, I'm jus' tryin' to be friendly—"

"I know what you tryin' to do."

"No, you don't. Sure, I'd like to mount you. In that I ain't no different than the hundred other guys who saw all those goodies spread out in that mud ring yestiddy. . . ."

"Well, tha's too bad, 'bout you—an' them."

"Don't start gettin' uppity again, Borgia. Hell, I'm your masta. You nothin' but a black slave. I can take you anytime I want—an' I have to git some of these black men to hold you down for me."

"That's about the way it'll be," she said in a mild, flat tone. She kept her face straight ahead.

"You made me some money back there, Lucretia. A lot of money. Most every man I made a bet with paid off. An' I collected for fightin' you against that Coffee gal. . . . Nothin' like what I could of made by sellin' you off to Mr. Preston Vernon back yonder, but no matter . . . I feel better about everything. I ain't so full of hatred toward you as I was."

She shrugged and walked, head up.

"Man, you gittin' biggoty an' uppity an' pridey again, ain't you?" he said.

She nodded, staring at him. "You right," she said. "I am. I sho am. I gettin' to be more like me evah minute. . . ."

When they reached a plowed field that had been allowed to go fallow and run to weeds, Cleavenger halted the coffle on a grassy, pine-shaded knoll overlooking a wide, shallow white-rocked stream. He left one of the larger Negro men in charge and rode out into the open meadow. In an hour he returned with five rabbits slung to his saddle horn. He set the slaves to skinning the animals, while others gathered wood and built a fire in a cooking pit.

Lucretia Borgia knelt over the fire and cooked the cut-up rabbits to a chicken-golden brown. While the

rabbit fried she made an iron pot of grits. When she removed the rabbit from the skillet, she added flour and water, made a paste, salted and peppered it, and served gravy over the grits.

Still too full of agony to be hungry, she sat aside and watched the white man and his coffle devour the food. In a way, it was pathetic. Both master and slaves were almost starved for decent food. The aging black Timon touched his forehead with his forefinger and grinned at Lucretia. "Tha's a most satisfyin' meal, ma'am," he said. "I wants to thank you most heartily, Miz Lucretia Borgia."

Miz Lucretia Borgia! She felt her heart leap in her chest. How long had it been since anyone had shown her the respect and admiration in the old man's tone? The other slaves nodded, grinning, and added their appreciation and gratification. "Sure a good meal, ma'am. Thankee, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am."

Foye wiped up his plate with his forefingers, licked at them, and then laughed loudly.

Lucretia Borgia jerked her head around. "What you laughin' at, white man?"

Foye shrugged. "Miz Lucretia Borgia . . . These niggers can call you that, but jus' don't git no uppity ideas about who you are."

She stared at him coldly. One thing that savage fight in the mud had done for her, she admitted. The ugliness may have dragged her into the depth of evil and depravity, but it had restored some of her lost self-respect. She felt herself coming up out of the black despair in which she had passed all these days and nights since she'd been dragged away from Falconhurst. She could feel herself coming back to life.

She spoke coldly. "They calls me that because they knows—jus' like you do—tha's who I am—Miz Lucretia Borgia."

Foye Cleavenger struggled to his feet. He belched loudly and stroked his protuberant belly with the flat of

both his hands. "We ain't been makin' real good time. We got a fur piece to travel. We're breakin' camp and we're movin' fast all afternoon to dark."

Lucretia Borgia stood up. She was still free of her chains, having been loosed to cook the noon meal. Foye's voice rasped at her. "What you think you goin' to do?"

"I got to bathe in that creek. It shallow, but it clear and cold and clean. I still covered with clay, all inside my legs, everywhere. I got to wash with soap, or I ain't walkin' nowhere very long."

Cleavenger scowled. He despised any black talking to him in that tone, but he also knew a chafed and raw black could slow them all down. "I don't know," he said. "You wastin' my time."

She met his gaze levelly. "If you think I'm trying to git away," she said, "you can stand guard while I bathe. Right on the bank if you want to."

She saw the blood flush upward across his sun-reddened face to the roots of his thinning hair. She saw the way his emotions sent shadows through his pale, bleached eyes. She watched him swallow hard at his Adam's apple.

His voice was husky. "Well, by damn. You're gittin' smarter, too. . . . Easier to git along with, eh?"

"I just don't care no more," she said in a submissive tone.

"Why, *Miz Lucretia Borgia*," he taunted. "What a way to talk."

He tossed her a cake of lye soap. She walked down the incline to the creek. The other blacks slumped silently on the knoll, staring after them. Foye Cleavenger took his coiled bullwhip in his hand and followed her downslope to the creek.

The stream cut its way through a thicket of scrub oaks and willows, glittering in the sunlight. Its bed was white sand and river rocks. Though it was twenty feet across, it was less than four feet deep even in its channel. But the cold water ran swiftly, leaping over white rocks and swirling in blue eddies.

At the brink of the creek Lucretia caught the sides of the oversized dress at her hips and pulled it slowly upward over her head. She heard Foye's deepened breathing close behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder. The slaver stood only a few feet behind her, his bullwhip at his side. He was already growing excited. She saw that at his crotch. She sighed and said nothing. She started to throw her dress behind her.

Cleavenger spoke in a husky voice. "Go ahead. Throw it. I'll catch it."

She changed her mind. "I'll just wash it after I bathe," she said. "It could be a lot cleaner."

"You a mighty particular woman, ain't you?" he said.

"You'll jus' nevah know how particular," she told him. She stepped out into the water, almost stumbling on a protruding rock. The icy water sent chills like charges up from her ankles.

She waded hesitantly out into the deeper water, shivering against the swift icy current. "Hell," Foye growled from behind her. "You gonna keep your damn back turned all day?"

She turned around and faced him guilelessly. "What did you say?"

"My God." He muttered the words and sank to the riverbank, his booted legs apart, staring at her. His eyes burned with anguished hunger. She soaked the dress in the stream, saturated it with soap, and used it as a washcloth.

Fascinated by her nudity, Foye gazed at her from the creekbank. The water came only a few inches above her knees; the rest of her disrobed body was exposed to his view.

He watched her wash her armpits and between her thighs, and followed the bunched fabric as it moved across the rises and planes of her body. Her naked flesh gleamed with rivulets of water and reflected the sun.

His eyes anguished with need, Foye stared at her, gape-mouthed.

She took her time. She kept waiting for the slaver to hurry her up, but he said nothing. He did lick at his mustache with his tongue, and once he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"My God, gal," he said in a voice more like a croak than manly, "you oughta wash that there pretty again—can't take no chances on clay an' all."

She peered at him, the water dripping from her body, marbling on her hardened nipples and spilling along her stomach. She said, "You know, you really is a dirty ole white man, ain't you?"

He swallowed hard and nodded, his eyes gleaming. "Hell, honey, I was a dirty young white man—why wouldn't I grow up to be a nice dirty ole white man?"

"You got no shame," she told him, but she did not turn away.

"That's right." His voice sounded raspy and dry now. "Jesus. You jus' don't know what you is. . . . Hell, they don't build many women noble and full and smooth like you. Color of caramel. Plenty of flesh. But satiny and firm in all the right places."

She smiled faintly, almost as if pleased by his flattery. She let him stare as she finished her bath unhurriedly. Then, bent over so her magnificent breasts hung like clusters of ripe grapes, she soaped and soaked her dress, sloshing it in the stream. Finding a stone larger than her fist, she came forward toward the edge of the creek to where larger river rocks protruded from the water line. She spread the dress over a larger boulder and beat at it with the one in her fist.

"You cleaning that dress, or you jus' takin' out your hatreds?" Foye asked, gazing at her, entranced.

She turned away from him, twisting the dress and wringing it out. Then she shook the dress out and, in a sleight of hand, wrapped the stone inside it.

She stood a moment gazing up at Cleavenger, who sat, half paralyzed with anguished need, staring at her. She walked slowly toward him, keeping her hands and the dress at her sides.

He gaped, disbelievingly. "You drivin' me crazy, Lucretia," he said. "That what you tryin' to do?"

"I not tryin' to do anything," she said in a low, almost gentle tone. The good Lord knew she was mistress at saying what white people wanted to hear. "You right. I's been uppity. No mattah what else. I's your slave."

He looked as if the very implications of these words would unman him. He winced from the sudden spasm deep in his loins.

"Oh, Jesus," he whispered, mostly to himself and in deep agony. "I ain't shot off in my pants since I was fifteen."

She came out of the water and stood a few feet in front of him. "Am I upsettin' you, Masta?"

"My God, gal. You upsettin' the squirrels in the trees."

"I don't mean to." She shook out the dress, holding it over her right hand, in which she gripped the river rock. "I'll git dressed, quick as I can."

"Ain't no call to do that. You let the dress dry out some. We got time. . . . Hell, Lucretia, you be nice to me, it could all be one hell of a lot better for you. . . . Nights, I lets you sleep on my blanket. . . . You don't wear no irons no more—"

She said, "I think about it." But she let the dress drape over her right fist and sag to the grass at her side.

"When?" he said. "When?"

"Maybe tonight."

She walked closer. She stood tall only a foot or so from him. Whimpering in a helpless way, the slaver tossed his bullwhip into the grass behind him. Tumescient, addled, driven by passions he could no longer control, he reached for her with both hands.

He caught her firm, rounded hips in his hands. She felt the way he quivered. She allowed him to pull her close between his knees until his whiskered face was buried against her stomach.

From the underbrush above the creek Miz Lucretia Borgia heard the restive stirring of the spanceled blacks.

Inside, she quivered with a tormented raging of laughter. These sorry creatures were culls of the slave world, the halt, the ill, the retarded, the undernourished, but they reacted hardily now, suddenly vibrant, expectant, fascinated, their faces twisted in savage grins, their eyes glimmering, blood boiling in their veins, animals roused.

She heard their chains and shackles rattle as they crept closer on the incline, their simian chatter muted but crackling in the static atmosphere.

She felt the rough scraping of Cleavenger's bristled beard biting into her tender flesh. She shivered, caught between a violent rush of hatred and unwanted sensual stirrings whetted by his fevered cravings and his frantic mouth.

Cleavenger licked at her body with his tongue, his lank mustache and sodden whiskers heated.

He came upward from his knees slowly, levering himself to his feet. It was as if he moved involuntarily, propelled by some will outside himself, no longer behaving rationally, cautiously, or wanting to. He had learned in twenty years to stay eternally alert or to suffer. At this moment he threw all prudence aside, driven by irresistible compulsion. He was barely aware of the whispering, bug-eyed slaves, crouching in a slaving semicircle on the weeded incline above the creekbed. If he knew the slaves were there, he did not care. He was impelled by passions denied, repulsed, and repelled for a hundred hungry miles. He had wanted this woman from the first. Her obstinate refusal to submit only intensified his lusts. He would have her. Aye, God, he would. He was white. A white man with a white man's prerogatives. He was a man; he was her master. She was a black whore, and now he was what he had wanted to be all these restless, sleepless nights on the dark trails west. He was her whore master.

His hands moved on her breasts and her belly—rough, callused, demanding, against her supple flesh.

"Ah, God," he said. "Ah, God."

She hated him. She hated the sight, the smell, the

touch of him. She had to deny in her thoughts what he was doing to her so that she could keep her hatred from glittering like shattering fires in the depths of her black eyes. She closed her eyes tightly. She held her breath as long as she could. She thought about home. About Falconhurst. The hollyhocks and gardenias and azaleas growing about the yard. Satyr. That beautiful young body. Paps like buds on his muscled chest. She thought of the lovers she'd willingly, happily, opened her arms and her mouth and her legs and her entire being to in pleasure and delight.

She felt his hand move against the heated mound at her crotch. His palm closed over the dark hairs, his finger punctured the folded lips, probing in the fiery sauces that surged there from habit and not in response to this brutal and despised white man.

She dropped the sodden dress and with it the concealed stone.

She heard the distant thud as the river rock struck the ground. She waited, breathless, but Cleavenger was aware of nothing except the simmering liquidity at her thighs.

He drew her harder against him.

"Gonna have you now," he whispered hoarsely against her face. "Goin' do it, I am. . . . Goin' horse-fuck you, black woman. You fuggin' nigger. I'm goin' pile-drive my cock to you just like I been dreaming."

Lucretia remained motionless. She said nothing. Her breath quickened hatefully as his finger probed deeper inside her, and, almost without willing it, she felt her legs part slightly for him.

Cleavenger shuddered in anguished pleasure, and the chattering from the incline rose, a fevered sound in the forest silence.

Her left hand slipped down to where his throbbing rigidity bulged and strained at the fabric of his trousers.

She caught his massive rod in her fist, gripping it. She heard him gasp, as if unable to choke a full breath down through his taut gullet.

He shoved one of his legs between hers, forcing her thighs farther apart to accommodate his searching, pulsing.

She loosened the buttons of his fly and took his rigid spike tightly in her fist, working it so he shuddered and made a whimpering sound of sweet agony deep in his throat.

He half threw her back upon the sod of the riverbank, falling with her and thrusting his hips between her widened thighs in case she still resisted him.

She did not resist. She struck the ground, the breath driven from her. There was appalling cruelty in his attack. There was nothing to be shared in this conflict. Possessing her body was not enough for him either. He wanted to overpower her, storm her, whip her into submission with the furious assault of his maulstick.

She felt the rugged man drive himself into her in a forcible entry, as if he anticipated her contention, demanding, audacious, punishing. He wanted to hurt her because only in hurting her could he prove his total mastery.

She sagged beneath him, her legs wide, her well opened to him. She gave the devil his due. He was maddened, but it was the bristling of honest and overwhelming desire that drove him. His unsheathed sword thrust into her like a falchion—broad blade, slightly curved, quivering with passions and inflexible.

She slumped back in the wet clay, hating the man but unable to despise what he was doing to her, despite her need to loathe him if she were to live. Blood pounded at her temples. Her own body betrayed her. She chewed at her full-lipped mouth, fiery charges of electric impulses firing upward from her thighs. She was born to passion; she could not help that.

She felt herself responding whether she willed it or not. She clenched her fists. She could surrender; she could be God's fool and succumb to the sweet ravaging anguish of this moment and she'd leave this place as Cleavenger's slave, in shackles. But she felt famished, droughty, parched with need. He was driving her out of

her gourd. She had to close her mind to what was happening to her. She felt around beside her, seeking her dress and the boulder concealed in its folds.

Cleavenger cried out, tormented, and sagged upon her, for this brief beat as helpless as he would ever be in this world.

As he ejaculated he shuddered, quivered, trembled, totally helpless. His hips bucked; his legs wavered uncontrollably. His head went back on his tendon-strung neck.

He expelled his juices from his inmost core, a consummation he'd never forget. He sobbed, whispering, promising, agonized, and sated all at once.

Her hand tightened on the stone as he sprawled vulnerable and prone upon her. She meant to make this moment even more memorable for him. He just thought he was racked with madness from head to toe. He wouldn't know what hit him.

He slumped there over her, shuddering, gasping, panting. Holding her breath, she brought the smooth boulder up in her fist. God help him. The bearded bastard. This was a coupling he would always remember—if he survived it. . . .

She struck him behind his left ear with the river rock. She swung it as she might maneuver a heavy cast-iron skillet, as she might repulse a varmint attacking her. A sickening, crunching thud of stone against his skull reverberated in the midst of the sudden horrified screams of the slaves.

She drew back her arm in a wild panic, ready to strike him again if he moved. But it was as though Foye didn't even know what hit him. He did not even cry out. She was aware of his opened mouth, which had been nuzzling feveredly at her, and then he slumped forward on her. His hands fell away from her hips. His eyes were open but were glazed over.

She heaved the dead weight of his body off of her, and stood up. Retreating a step, she hefted the stone in her fist and watched him with narrowed eyes. Cleavenger

lay on the ground, his head almost at the edge of the water.

"You kill him an' you hit him again," a black woman's voice said from the knoll above her. Lucretia jerked her head up and stared at the toothless Vahrina. Timon stood a yard or so behind her.

"My God, an' you done it now," Timon moaned. "You done kilt a white man. You git us all hung."

"I don't mean to wait around here for no white posse to hang me," Lucretia Borgia said.

She knelt to one knee beside Cleavenger. He was unconscious, unmoving. He seemed to be staring, through glass-pane eyes, into some unknown depths. His mouth remained slightly parted.

Quickly, Lucretia checked his heart, found it beating, if slowly and irregularly. "He's alive," she said over her shoulder. "I ain't kilt him. Not yet."

"Not yet?" Timon's voice was like the anguished cry of her own conscience.

"Not yet," she agreed. "I won't kill him unless I has to." She let the river rock fall from her grasp to the ground.

Kneeling over the trader, she fished in his pockets. She came up first with the iron key to the slaves' shackles and spancels.

She glanced over her shoulder at the stricken dark faces fixed upon her. She said, "Here's the key." She tossed it to Vahrina, who let it fall in the grass between her bare feet. "Any of you smart, you break free now and run. You wants to run 'fore this white man come to again. . . . We all run different ways, no way he can overcome us all."

Old Timon shook his head. "We run, the paddy rollers gits us if'n Mistah Cleavenger, he don't."

She swore at them, still going through the inert man's pockets. Her voice shook. "Haven't you any sense? That's the chance you got to take."

"What chance?" Timon said. "Where-at we going?"

"My God. Does it matter? Go anywhere. Run. Get

out of here. You think you could have it any worse than you do with this—this man?"

"Yes'm," Timon's voice quavered. "I's had it worse."

"We'uns ain't smart like you," Vahrina said. "We ain't got no place to go do we run away."

"Not without the masta," Timon said.

Miz Lucretia ignored them and the other slaves who gathered in a semicircle around her now. She found a gold eagle and took it. Finally, in Foye's inner jacket pocket she found the case containing his bills of sale. She had no trouble identifying the bill that had come from Falconhurst. She could make out her own name and a few of the words she had seen a hundred times before over the years.

Still kneeling over the slaver, Lucretia dropped the case and the other bills of sale. She ripped the Falconhurst bill into pieces, savagely, knotted the residue in a ball, and threw it as far as she could into the swift-running creek.

She stood up, shivering with the frustration and rage roiling deep inside her. She stared at Vahrina and Timon and the others. "If you won't run now when you can, God help you. Stay here till your white masta wakes up and go on down into hell with him. I'm damned if I will."

She shook the wet dress down over her head, and, clasping the gold eagle in her fist, she ran up the incline to where Cleavenger's saddled horse grazed.

She took up the reins. Timon cried out in anguish, "Lord, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am, that's the masta's horse."

"An' it's as poor an' sickly as you are. Jus' hope it can git me where I'm going. If you're still here when your masta wakes up, you say that Miz Lucretia Borgia leave word that if he follows me this time, I truly kills him. . . . You tell him, he wants to come lookin' for me, I headin' east and north—I'm goin' home to Falconhurst." She swung her leg over the saddle and stared down at them. "An' tell him, I couldn't wait around—'cause I got a long way to go."

XXIX

Doc Redfield strode up the plank steps onto the wide gallery at Falconhurst. He paused, noting the unswept flooring, the accumulation of debris against the walls, the tall toddy glasses left where Master Warren had discarded them. He winced faintly, as if witnessing the desecration of some revered domain, but he did not slow down. He paused only long enough to rap sharply once on the door framing, and then he jerked open the screen door and walked into the foyer.

Vesta cried out, shocked. He jerked his head up and found her on the lower stairway, coming down from the landing. It was almost as if she appeared there, gliding, like an apparition, rather than simply descending the steps as ordinary women might. In that flash of time he noticed that she seemed to have changed, altered in a way that he could put no name to but sensed disturbingly nevertheless. The whole farm had changed; it had gone to hell since Lucretia Borgia had been sold.

"Why, Dr. Redfield." She gasped and pressed the tips of her extraordinary fingers at the base of her extraordinary throat. "You just frightened me out of my wits."

He spoke brusquely, too harried and preoccupied to be gallant. Strange, he'd thought this woman ethereal,

fragile, and gently lovely the first time he saw her, but suddenly, he no longer liked her. He could not say why, but she frightened him, and this was an entirely new experience for him. He had been charmed by southern gentlewomen before, but he had never been scared of anything in skirts.

"I knocked," he said.

She ran her slender hand along the balustrade and gave him a faint, empty smile. "I'm sure you did, Dr. Redfield. But I'm also sure one of the servants would have welcomed—and announced you—which is certainly the accepted procedure for entering a private home, isn't it?"

"Too old a friend for that kind of formality," he told her. "Also, in too much of a hurry." He crossed the foyer and started up the stairs. "If you'll excuse me."

This time her gasp was a faint cry of indignation. "Why—where are you going?" She stood as if barring his way on the stairs.

He met her gaze, still wasting no time. "I'm going up to see Warren. If you'll pardon me . . . He is upstairs, isn't he?"

"Yes." The word was a sibilant hiss.

"In his bed?"

"Yes, he is."

"I heard he was feelin' poorly—last couple days. Very poorly is what we heard over to Seven Mile Road."

She shrugged and smiled. "I believe he may be feeling a little unwell."

"A little unwell? That ain't what I heard, Missy. I heard that he's bad off—worse than before."

Vesta shook her head, her jaw tightening. "I simply do not understand how these terrible rumors get circulated. I think the darkies must trade them—from farm to farm—and these lies grow with each telling."

He shook his head impatiently. "No, ma'am. I been hearin' these 'rumors' all my life out here. . . . I've rarely found them to be wrong—or exaggerated. And I may as well tell you, I came galloping all the way be-

cause the word we got is that Warren Maxwell may be dying."

"Why, that's ridiculous."

He gave her a counterfeit smile. "Well, you won't mind if I look in on him, then, will you?"

She tried with an unobtrusive parry to bar his way again. "It may not be—convenient. . . . He may be sleeping—"

"Or he may be dead. If he took in more of what almost poisoned him last time, he may be beyond help." He shook his head, staring at her, incredulous. "When Warren fell ill again, why didn't you call me?" He pushed past her as he spoke and continued up the stairs, taking them two steps at a time.

Vesta hesitated half a breath, then picking up her skirts above her ankles, she followed. Her voice remained flat and untroubled. "I didn't see the need to burden you."

He hesitated and stared across his shoulder. "He's sick, ain't he?"

"As I say, a little under the weather."

"And you promised to send for me if he failed—in any way at all."

"It's not that he's physically ill. He's only upset. He's been upset."

He'd started forward again. Now he paused and glanced back down at her. "I know he's been upset. His farm is going to hell. A place he put his sweat and blood in, going down the rain gulley." He paused at the head of the stairs, his black-nailed hands on the newel-post. "We've heard. Everything going to hell over here."

"You can hear anything if you listen to darkies."

"I heard you lost three black gits in the past week—"

"I?" Her brow lifted. "I have nothing to do with the birth of slaves. I certainly have nothing to do with those matters."

"You told me you were running things here."

"I am."

"Somebody has got to oversee the midwives. Some-

body has got to tell them what to do, and be sure they do it, most of the time. It takes on-the-spot supervision. . . . That was just one of the jobs that Lucretia Borgia handled around here."

"That woman." Her mouth tightened, going white. "That's all I hear around this place. . . ." She smiled. "I can assure you it is certainly less agitated with her gone."

"If Lucretia had been here, Miss Vesta, she'd of sent the niggers a-runnin' for me when Maxwell fell ill."

Vesta faced him coldly and unblinkingly in the shadowed corridor. She kept her voice modulated, overly polite, and correct. "Then she would have explicitly disobeyed me—again."

"Oh?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor. Cousin Warren is slightly ill. I'm not even sure he's running a fever—"

"Do you know how to take his temperature?"

"Well, no, I don't, but—"

"A hand to the forehead is not a scientific measurement, Miss Vesta. Forgive me, but I am a little irritated about this."

"By what right?"

"By the right of lifelong friendship. By the fact that I feel responsible for Warren's good health, and because you promised to get in touch with me at the first sign of trouble."

"Doctor, I've agreed that Cousin Warren is sickly. But even so, I would not have sent for you."

Doc Redfield's eyebrows shot up, and his faded eyes showed his shock. His voice rasped. "An' you mind sayin' why not?"

"Not under these circumstances. No. I have no wish to distress you, Doctor. But I believe it to be highly inappropriate to call a *veterinarian* to treat Cousin Warren. After all, he's not an animal, is he?"

"We're all animals, Miss Vesta," Doc Redfield said. "Under the skin. Some predatory. Some domesticated. Some stupid. But still animals."

"Yes. Well, I feel the practice of medicine is different for a general practitioner and a veterinarian. I wanted a true medical doctor to tend Cousin Warren."

"I saved his life before, didn't I?"

"Yes. Well, I didn't want you then. I didn't approve."

"Oh?"

"I've sent the Negro Napoleon into Benson to ask Dr. Smith to come out—at his convenience."

"Dr. Smith? You sent for Smith?" Redfield's voice thundered so loudly in the silent hallway that maids peered anxiously from doorways and Cousin Bower Ledbetter hurried from his bedroom, still knotting his tie. Redfield stared at Vesta, his eyes revealing his inner illness. "You sent for Smith? That clap carrier."

Vesta winced. "He's a medical doctor," Vesta said.

"He's a charlatan. A quack. And diseased . . . He can't cure his own self. He can only spread his pox everywhere he goes. Warren won't let Smith in the house. When he was here oncet, Warren run him off."

Bower Ledbetter joined them. He smelled strongly of toilet water and shaving soap. He peered, troubled, from Vesta to Redfield. "What on earth is wrong?"

Vesta spread her shapely, long-fingered hands. She tilted her chin, vilified, but unbowed. "Dr. Redfield seems to think I am neglecting Cousin Warren's welfare. I am sure I do all I can for him, Bower. You can speak for me, can't you?"

"No one needs to speak for you, Miss Vesta," Redfield said. "We're wasting time out here."

Vesta continued to address Bower. "I explained to him that I have sent for Dr. Smith—a medical doctor."

"Dr. Smith carries and spreads infection—incurable, with what we presently know about venereal diseases." Redfield spoke in a flat tone, staring at Bower until the natty, lean man let his gaze slide away, discomfited. "Smith is also an ignoramus. If he infects Warren's blacks, his pox could wipe out the whole herd quicker'n epizootic or the vomits."

Bower spread his hands. He glanced around uneasily.

"Well, I'm certain Vesta didn't know this when she summoned him."

"Of course I didn't," Vesta said. "I'm only doing the best I can. That's what nobody seems to understand or appreciate around here."

Redfield glanced at her, his eyes glittering slightly. "It don't matter no way," he said. "I'm here now. I'll do what I can."

He found Warren lying pale and inert under a stack of heavy woolen blankets. The room was tightly closed, the shades drawn, the smells stale and unpleasant and faintly nauseating. The boldly embossed porcelain lamp burned on the table beside Warren's bed in the middle of the morning. Redfield felt his nose quiver in disgust at the heavy sickroom smell.

"Jesus," Redfield said. "It stinks in here."

He walked over to the windows, threw up the shades, and opened the frames. Breezes flooded coolly around him and gushed across the room. Sunlight seemed to implode through the shadowed chamber.

Redfield returned to the bed and bent over the unmoving Warren. Maxwell had slipped into an almost involuntary sleep. The ill man breathed shallowly, in an impatient, frightened, and frustrated way. Redfield saw that his old friend didn't know what he was doing; he was barely conscious at all. There was no way to know, as debilitated as he was, whether he even heard what went on around him in the room.

Vesta stood aside rigidly, insulted, her pride injured. Redfield glanced toward her, scowling. For God's sake, it looked as if it were more important to her that her authority was questioned—even countermanded—than that her ailing cousin Warren was receiving medical attention. Well, he'd verified that what he'd feared was true. He had no time to worry about stepping on her toes. The hell with her and her terminal etiquette. He spoke in her direction, without compassion. "Even if I

am just a horse doctor, Miss Vesta," he said, "I can tell you that your cousin Warren is dyin'—"

"I've done all I can!" Vesta cried out in protest as if he had accused her, rather than informed. "I told you. I sent for a doctor. You'll never be able to say I didn't send for a doctor."

Redfield nodded. His quiet voice was cold. "Yes. But one of the first things we told you was that the medical doctor from Benson ain't allowed to step on these here premises."

Vesta tilted her head again. Shadows swirled deeply in her almond-shaped black eyes.

She spoke imperiously. "If I am to be responsible here, I'll have to be permitted to make such decisions, won't I?"

They heard noise and movement in the corridor, and it was almost with a sense of vindication that Vesta saw Mem enter Warren's bedroom with a slender, fair-haired man in an alpaca coat, gray trousers, and dusty boots, in tow.

"This heah Dr. Smith, Miz Vesta, ma'am," Mem said. He retreated a step after he had spoken as if, in instinctive terror, he attempted to hide in his own shadow.

"Oh, thank goodness you've come, Doctor," Vesta said.

"I'm highly pleased to be of service, ma'am." Dr. Smith extended his hand, and Vesta clasped it warmly.

Redfield turned at the bedside, guarding it as if he were a sentry alone and beset at some disputed barricade. "'Fore you come near this heah bed, you wash your hands in that commode yonder, Smith," Redfield ordered. "An' even then, you don't touch nothin' you don't have to touch."

Smith smiled coldly. His venereal disease was a malaise of long-standing and much controversy in the community. He was accustomed to disapprobation. By now it was all part of an incurable suffering. He merely said, "Are you qualified to treat human beings, Redfield?"

"'Bout same as you, Willis."

"An' when was the last time you washed your hands?" Smith inquired.

"Ain't a clap-carrier," Redfield said. He shook his head in a positive way. "I can tell you, was Warren Maxwell conscious—sick as he is—he'd run your tail off'n Falconhurst land."

"I'm here because I was summoned in grave emergency." Smith approached the bed, pushing his sleeves up on his bare forearms. "Why don't you accept what consultation you can get, Redfield? It's not costing you anything."

Vesta moved in that wraithlike way to the foot of the bed. Her black eyes gleamed with tears. "Please, Dr. Smith," she said. "Do what you can to save my poor dear cousin Warren."

"You know I will, dear lady," Smith said. He glanced up and smiled.

"He means so much to me," Vesta said in a low, desperate tone. "I have not known him too well—not for very long. But I have come to love him. Deeply. Both Bower and I have."

Smith nodded and turned his professional attention to Warren Maxwell, but as he worked he was thinking that when word got around in Benson that he had been called to treat one of the Maxwells of Falconhurst, his practice might well prosper. Perhaps some of the slanderous whispers would be stilled. There was no way, of course, that he could disseminate the tidings around town; that would be totally unacceptable and, anyway, would not have the impact as word spread from the outside, while he went about his daily routines, as if such calls were to be customary from now on.

Dr. Smith fingered down Warren's eyelids. "Some kind of rash," he murmured. Then he checked the patient's pulse and heartbeat. "Stringy," he decided, nodding to himself. "Breath stinks." He straightened and shook his head, his face dour but concerned. "I'm afraid, Miss Vesta, there isn't much we can do for your poor

cousin Warren. Poor man. Though, of course, I want you to know, I'll do all I can. He'll get every benefit of modern medical knowledge. . . . But I would have to say to you that his condition is extremely grave—and it's simply an irreversible matter of old age."

"Old age!" Redfield reacted as if he'd been struck suddenly in the crotch. He stood up straight, quivering with outrage. "Old age? Shit, Smith. What brand of modern medical knowledge is that yo're peddlin'? Warren Maxwell ain't forty-five years old yet."

Dr. Willis Smith shrugged imperturbably. "Old age attacks all of us differently, Redfield. Old age comes on some of us faster than on others. A man can be sixty and young—except chronologically. Another man can be thirty-five and decrepit physically and mentally. It's all in the way we live. Way we take care of ourselves and our bodies." He gestured toward Warren's gnarled hands on the cover. "Look at them hands. Knotted and twisted and misshapen with rheumatism. Those are the hands of an old man—a very old man. . . . And why not? I hear he sits in his chair every blessed day of his life, drinking liquor from morning until night. . . . Only exercise he gets is walking from his bed to his chair to the dining table and back. . . . My God, what do you expect?"

Redfield drew a deep breath, and it was a long moment before he trusted himself to speak aloud. "I don't think you know what you're talking about," he said.

Willis Smith gave him a twisted smile. "Well, friend, nothing could concern me less than what you think. This is outside the range of the veterinarian. But . . . for the record, mind you, what do *you* think is the cause of his desperate—and terminal—illness?"

Redfield breathed again deeply. "Poison," he said. "I think, by God, he's been poisoned. I'd stake my reputation on it."

Redfield and Dr. Smith ordered the sickroom cleared except for Mem and two younger house boys. Dr. Smith

filled a large bulb with hot soapy water and, through a tube inserted into Warren's rectum, administered an enema. Soon the sheets were covered with noxious fluids. The nauseated black boys cleaned up the bed and the floor and spread fresh sheets and blankets on the mattress. Warren stirred slightly, protesting, but he did not speak.

By this time Redfield had prepared a caustic emetic. Warren was weak but conscious enough to fight them. They managed to force the pungent liquid down his throat.

It seemed he had barely swallowed the concoction when he vomited, the corruption erupting from his wide-spread mouth and spewing over his bed. One of the servants barely made it to the window before he, too, threw up, heaving and gasping. He stayed for a long time clinging to the windowsill.

The two men worked unceasingly for many uncounted hours. The sun slid westward and seared the room, turning it into an airless oven. And then the sky grew molten with color and darkened, purpling up from the horizons. They lighted lamps through the house, but finally Warren slept, quietly, his fever broken. By this time a grudging kind of respect grew between the two men.

"You ain't bad for a veterinarian," Smith said.

"And you don't do bad for a clap-carrier. Reckon you do 'bout the best you can with swollen testicles."

"Think you're right. He's been poisoned, all right."

Redfield nodded. "That scarlet rash he's got—that ain't smallpox."

"That quick pulse—weak pulse. That's another sure sign."

"Be good an' we knew what kind of poison."

"Yeah. We don't know what kind. But it is poison. Way he breathed was a sure symptom, rapid like that, then getting shallow and feeble, almost in the same instant."

Redfield sighed. "I think what Maxwell needs right now is some kind of stimulant. Might help his heart."

"Might. Whiskey'd be good for all of us," Smith agreed.

"I get some of Masta's corn squeezin's, Mista Redfield, suh," Mem said.

Redfield let Memnon get as far as the door. Then he said, "Mem. You bring a bottle that's never been opened, you hear me?"

"Yassuh." Mem nodded seriously. "I do that. I done stop drinkin' what the masta left in the bottom of he toddy glasses."

"Probably the smartest thing you ever did," Dr. Smith said.

"Miz Lucretia Borgia, she the one tole me to stop it," Mem said. "She say them drinks' pizzen."

"Bring glasses for all four of us," Redfield said. "An don't talk so much. Nigger cain't do nothin' but git in trouble for talkin'."

Mem nodded. "Yassuh. Miz Lucretia done tole me that too."

"Get us some glasses," Smith ordered. Mem went out the door and closed it behind him.

Redfield scowled, looking at Smith sprawled in a rocking chair near an open window. "I reckon it be all right, you drinkin' from a Falconhurst glass. This time. Long's ole Warren don't catch you. . . . Reckon alcohol kills germs, anyhow—even the clap."

Smith shrugged. "What the hell. If it don't, I'll break the glass—after I've had a few."

XXX

Miz Lucretia Borgia's heart lurched in exultance. She recognized the familiar country around Falconhurst. She was almost home! The horse under her faltered and she found herself praying again for the millionth time since she'd escaped Foye Cleavenger. She'd heard Master Warren say it, and now she understood precisely what he had meant. "There ain't no scairt atheists." She spoke under her breath but fervently. "Please, Gawd, please, suh."

She let the animal plod at its own pace. She had traveled steadily, night and day. She'd re-covered the distance three times as swiftly as the coffle had crossed it, chained. She had pushed the horse, but she had tried to be humane toward it. She'd fed the animal well where she could, using more of her gold eagle on it than on her own food. She watered it frequently when they crossed the creeks that laced the countryside. She'd permitted it short rest periods, though she'd crouched tense and apprehensive at every stop. She'd done all she could to preserve whatever strength the spavined animal possessed at this late date.

The sunshine poured down on her, almost uncomfortably warm, except that it was the sun of home. She

loved the Falconhurst sun. Even its most brazen heat was not unbearable.

The road looked so reassuring! To her it was beautiful, even if it was no more than a narrow, man-hacked slit through the savage wilderness, overgrown and in places unmarked—it was the road home to Falconhurst!

She approached Benson and hesitated briefly, considering the trace which bypassed the village. Then, checking the tent-sized dress Coffee had given her, she rode along the main street to the general store. She tied her fatigued mount to the leather-slicked hitch rail outside, crossed the boardwalk to the overhung, merchandise-crowded stoop, and entered the cool, pleasant-smelling emporium.

The grocer leaned back in his chair against a warm and high-stacked counter. He glanced up at her over the weekly newspaper he was reading, but did not rise. "We don't sell to niggers," he said in a flat, mild tone. "Less'n they buyin' fo' they white masters."

"I'm Miz Lucretia Borgia from Falconhurst," she said. "Masta sent me to buy myself a new calico company dress and a nice red bandanna turban for my head."

"From Falconhurst, huh?" He laid aside his newspaper. "Always said ole Warren and his son, Hammond, had more money than brains—sending a black woman in to *buy* ready-made clothing. My God, what a waste. But. What the hell? It's his money. I suppose he wants it added to his regular charge account too?"

Miz Lucretia smiled broadly. She was almost home, and best of all, she was returning to Falconhurst in style. She nodded. "Sure," she said. "He wants me to charge it. Why not?"

"Why not?" The grocer shook his head, incredulous at the ways of rich men, and led the way through the narrow aisles toward ready-to-wear. "It's his money."

Vesta managed to restore some semblance of order to the manor house.

She looked about her, sweated and uncomfortable, without knowing why. She descended the stairway slowly, trailing her fingers along the reassuring firmness of the balustrade. Things had been so hectic, but she'd finally exerted her overwhelming personality and had quieted them down, starting the flow in her chosen channeling again.

Dr. Willis Smith had departed the night before, though it was long after ten o'clock and it was a dark and dangerous ride back into Benson alone. As a final concession, they had sent along a sturdy young black giant named Phallus to sit in the tonneau of the doctor's buggy, with a mule tied to the tailgate.

Dr. Smith might have spent the night, but Cousin Warren had recovered briefly, strong enough and enraged enough to order the village physician off the place.

Redfield had made the most trouble for Vesta. He had insisted upon staying overnight. This morning he had personally mixed the toddy for Warren and delivered it himself. But she'd refused to be intimidated by him. She'd insisted coldly that there was no need for him to neglect his own practice, his own home chores, to look after Warren, who seemed pale and feeble but was recovering. She promised she would send for Redfield at the first sign of any relapse in Cousin Warren's condition. She'd have promised anything. All she wanted was to get the nosy little veterinarian off the farm. She could think of no one she despised more cordially than Dr. Redfield, unless it was Lucretia Borgia of rabid memory. Well, they were both gone.

She admitted however to a sense of heaviness, a fevered kind of confusion. Always there was someone, black or white, running to her with some trivial, impossible, insoluble problem. . . .

Aye, God, how she hated these Negroes. They were everywhere underfoot. They multiplied like rabbits. There was a smell about even the house blacks that she could not abide. And the smartest was childlike. She would not have them around her a second longer than necessary.

She descended the stairs, trying to shake off that feeling of distraction, as if she floated in a mist of doubts. The hazy silences of the farm were shattered, and she shivered involuntarily, pausing to listen to the cries of the children, running from the gate up the lane. "Someone a-comin'—"

She paused at the foot of the stairs, bracing herself against the newel-post, because what she heard next, even though she could not credit it, paralyzed her for a long beat.

She gathered all her strength and will. She shook her head. She crossed the foyer and pushed open the screen door. She walked out to the veranda, where Memnon stood, grinning broadly and dancing from one foot to the other.

"Memnon."

"Yes, ma'am?" Mem stopped smiling and retreated a step, from new-formed habit.

"It sounded like those pickaninnies were screaming Lucretia Borgia's name."

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded again, swallowing at his Adam's apple.

"It sounded like they were saying she's out there, that she's on her way in here."

"Yes'm, Miz Vesta. That's what they sayin' . . . Miz Lucretia, she out on the trace, a-comin' this blessed instant through that gate and up that lane—Miz Lucretia Borgia a-comin' home!"

Vesta stood, immobile, biting back the sickness that rose hotly up into her throat.

Miz Lucretia Borgia, surrounded by swarms of milling black children, rode slowly but steadily all the way to the front steps. She slid down from the saddle then and relinquished the exhausted horse to the clamoring children, cautioning them to brush it down and feed it and water it.

Vesta remained unmoving. She was not even sure that

she could move. She felt as if she were paralyzed by her sense of outrage.

Mem, laughing and crying at the same time, ran down the steps to the drive, arms extended. Miz Lucretia Borgia hugged him for one brief moment, then she cracked him across the skull with the back of her hand. "Look at that front porch," she said. "Looks like a pigsty. You gits that trash cleaned off it this minute."

"Yes'm, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am." Mem went on smiling, though he held his hand tenderly against the side of his head. "Sho am like ole times havin' you back home to Falconhurst."

Miz Lucretia Borgia did not bother further with Mem. She picked up her spotless skirts and ascended the steps in crackling fresh calico, red turban, and heelless slippers.

She kept her face straight ahead, ignoring Vesta. She walked toward the front door. Vesta's rasping voice stopped her. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To see my Masta Warren." She turned away again.

"What are you doing here?" Vesta demanded.

With her hand on the screen-door handle, Miz Lucretia Borgia paused only long enough to glance toward the white woman. "I lives here."

"Not anymore you don't—I'll call the slave patrol."

Miz Lucretia Borgia's smile was almost pitying. "Yes'm. Whyn't you do that, Miz Vesta? It make you feel a lot better, I'm sure."

Warren Maxwell sat up in bed when the young house boy burst into his bedroom, crying, "She home, Masta! Miz Lucretia Borgia done come home."

For a long moment the sick man stared at the young servant. He shook his head. He wanted to believe but he was afraid to. He stared down at his gnarled hands trembling on the bedcovers, not even sure this was not another of those strange, drug-induced dreams. "You ain't lyin' to me, boy?"

"Ah, no, Masta. I nevah lie to you. Not 'bout that."

"You best not. You lie to me, I get Pole to whup you good."

"Yes, suh. But I ain't lyin'. If'n you could git out your bed, you could see her comin' up the lane an' to the house."

"You ain't lyin'?" Maxwell's hands shook. His eyes filled with tears and his mouth quivered. "Gawd, boy, I pray you ain't lyin'."

Then the door was thrown open again and there she stood, Lucretia Borgia, smiling broadly. Behind her stood Mem and most of the house slaves. Maxwell was barely aware of the others. He brushed away his tears, trying to focus his eyes on Lucretia Borgia, to be certain it was not a trick of his own wishful imagination.

"Lucretia Borgia!" he sobbed. "That truly you? Whure you come from? How you comin' on, gal? What in the world you doin' 'round here?"

Lucretia Borgia advanced slowly to the side of the bed. She took both Maxwell's hands in hers, clinging to them. Her heart lurched when she saw how glad the aging man was to see her, to have her back.

"Vesta say she done sold you," Maxwell said. "How you come back?"

"I been sold before, Masta," the servant replied.

He winced. "We all make mistakes, Lucretia. Hammond and me wrong 'bout that time we sells you off to that man in New Orleans. . . . Vesta—she wrong to sell you off to that trader. She young. She jes' don't know."

Lucretia Borgia shrugged. It was not something she cared to argue with the master about. He looked so ashen, as if he teetered on death's door.

He kept clinging to her hands. "You run away?"

She nodded. "I stood it long as I could, Masta. An' I knowed you needed me heah at Falconhurst. Seemed to me I could heah you callin' me in the night."

Warren laughed with her, clutching her hands. "That was me, all right."

"I ain't goin' back, Masta," Lucretia Borgia said. "I belong here."

He nodded, smiling through his tears. "You belong here. You ain't nevah going nowhure you don't want to go. If'n that man come a-trailin' you, we gits out one of our gold pots an' we pays him whatever we has to to git rid of him."

Lucretia broke into tears. "Thank you, Masta. . . . I knowed that was what you would say."

She smiled and straightened, withdrawing her hands. "What's the matter?" he said. "Set. An' talk. What's your rush? Where-at you hurryin' off to now?"

"Got a lot do," she said. "Nevah saw this place so rundown."

"Things in a turrible mess, all right," he agreed. "But it's all right now. You home, Lucretia Borgia."

Lucretia Borgia nodded, but she ceased smiling, and there was almost a chill in her tone. "I home, all right, Masta, but I got a lot of settin'-right to do. . . ."

Lucretia prowled the kitchen. She had changed her dress, hanging up her company calico carefully and putting on an older frock that had been made up and sewn here on the farm. But when she caught a glimpse of herself in a corridor mirror, she could not resist hesitating and preening for a moment. She wore her new red turban.

"I might even sleep in my new turban," she told the girls she had gathered for orders in the kitchen. She found that everything had been almost criminally neglected in her absence; even the walls and floors were grimy and greasy. She set teams of black maids to work scouring the house, every room from attic to rear-kitchen pantry.

She sent word to the quarters that she was home and that she expected a report on what had been happening in recent days. She was satisfied with the way the crews of maids and house boys fell to work under her orders. She had been afraid they had grown slothful while she was

gone. But they worked willingly and swiftly, seeming to want to show her how glad they were that she was back home at Falconhurst.

A knock at the back door of the kitchen brought her around. She expected to see Big Mama Lucy, or one of the field overseers, or the foreman from the barns or the shops.

Her heart speeded at the sight of the young giant beyond the screen door.

"Miz Lucretia," Satyr said. "It's me."

She smiled widely and stepped through the door to the shaded porch. Satyr looked troubled; he studied her face to be sure she was all right. When he was satisfied it was she, his eyes brimmed with tears. "Lordy, I just never been so glad to see anybody."

"I glad to see you too, Satyr," she said in a gentle tone. "How you comin' on?"

"I jus' thank Gawd you home, safe an' all."

"Thank you, Satyr. That's real thoughty of you."

"No'm." The tears welled in his eyes and spilled along his cheeks. "This is my heart speakin'. . . . I jus' wanted to yell hallelujah when they tole me you was back home. . . . Ain't nevah no other woman like you, Miz Lucretia Borgia. I nevah fo'git all you done for me . . . ain't nothin' I wouldn't do for you."

She laughed. "You say it with your heart, but you talkin' with your hips, boy."

He laughed. "Yep. It's you. It my Miz Lucretia Borgia. You back home all right."

She touched her palm lightly to Satyr's cheek and turned back to enter the house. She saw Mem standing there, a bleak look of loss on his high-yellow face. "What you want, boy?"

He waited until she let the screen door slam behind her. "Miz Vesta in the parlor. She say you ain't talked to her none since you come back."

"I talk to her. When I gits the time."

"She say she waitin' now. She wants to see you."

Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "If I evah took orders from that white gal, I through. You tell her Miz Lucretia Borgia too busy. You tell her I see her when I got the time."

Mem burst into sudden, helpless tears. "Lawd Gawd, Lucretia, don't send me in that room to say them words to that white woman."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I scairt to say 'em . . . I scairt of that woman, Lucretia."

She stared at him in contempt. "I reckon that's why you gits along well as you do, an' the reason why Gawd takes care of you like he do, Mem. You such a fool."

She walked slowly along the corridor and entered the living room. She felt chilled, but neither afraid nor unsure of herself.

Vesta and her husband awaited her. Bower Ledbetter sat in Master Warren's chair before the hearth, where a fire blazed, not from need but from old habit. The shades were pulled halfway down; the room was shadowed.

Vesta was standing near Bower's chair, as cold as marble. She said, "Close that door."

Lucretia Borgia simply ignored her. She walked into the room and paused a few feet from Vesta. She gazed at her in quiet defiance. "You wanted to see me?"

"I'd like to talk to you. But since there is no call to burden the others in this house with what I have to say to you, I would like that corridor door closed."

Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "Then close it."

Vesta drew a sharp breath and her eyes glittered. "I want to warn you. Coming in here, taking over. You can't stay here."

Lucretia Borgia smiled coldly at her. "You best talk to Masta Warren about that, Miss Vesta."

She saw Vesta's pale hands knot at her sides. But Vesta's voice remained as cold and level as Lucretia Borgia's. "Cousin Warren is a sick man. A very sick man. He hardly knows what he's saying."

"But I do. And the first thing I say is, you nevah catch me off guard like you done before. I ready for you now, white woman. Anything you try to do."

"This is my home—"

"Is it? Oh, I'm sure and positive you believe it will be—if Masta Warren dies. But there is still Masta Hammond."

"Hammond Maxwell is in Texas. I'll take up the matter of this place with him when he returns—if he returns—"

"Oh, he be back all right. Till then, I takin' care of Falconhurst for him, same as was he here, tellin' me what to do."

"But that's it. You won't be here. I wanted to give you an opportunity to leave quietly. If you elect not to—I shall send Napoleon to Benson to fetch the sheriff."

Lucretia Borgia even smiled. She nodded. She drew in a deep breath and exhaled it. No other reaction from her would have stunned Vesta and Bower as much, she saw with some satisfaction. "Send for the sheriff? You do that. I go out and calls Napoleon for you. I tells him to go, and give him our fastest horse. . . ." She straightened slightly and her voice chilled, the hatred icing its edge. "But before you sends for anybody, maybe I best tell you. I know why you're here. I know what you want. I know what happened to Masta Warren both times. But most of all, I know all about you."

"I'm not interested."

Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "All right, then. I go and send Nap for the sheriff. That what you want?"

Vesta's voice rasped. Her composure was shattering. Only Bower remained slouched in his chair, coldly calm. "You damned black bitch. I'll send for the sheriff when I'm ready. I won't have you telling me what to do."

"I tellin' you to leave while you can. Quiet and quick. I helps you pack. I explains to Masta Warren that you called away."

"You insufferable bitch, coming back here—"

"I ought to thank you. You kindly done me a favor—sending me off in that coffle. Gave me a lot of time to think an' recollect an' recall. Lots of time to remember."

"I told you. I have no interest—"

"I think you be mighty interested, Miss Vesta. Because I remember where I first saw you. I don't know yo' Mr. Ledbetter, but I know who you is."

"Oh?" Vesta's voice chilled again. She had fought herself back under icy control. "And who do you think I am, woman?"

"You ain't no ways who you say you is. You ain't no Miss Vesta Hammond. I know. I recall you was at Mr. Roche's mansion on Charles Street in New Orleans when I was there. Knowed I'd seen you. You was one of them night-walking whores what Cousin Charlie Woodford brought to put on one of them shows for the friends of Mr. Roche. Them men hated women and wanted to see them debased. . . . I wasn't supposed to, but I seen what they done to you that night—I won't ever forgit that, even if you can."

"You lying bitch."

"No. I ain't lying, and you know I ain't."

"Even if such a vile lie were true, who's going to take the word of a nigger woman against me?"

Miz Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "I was hoping you were smart enough, it wouldn't have to come to that."

Bower spoke at last, a whispered, sibilant warning. "Vesta."

The woman gestured downward sharply. "I'll handle this, Bower." She peered along her nose. "Is there more?"

"If you want to hear it. I even know how you found out what easy pickin's this might be for a white woman without no heart or soul or conscience . . . pure evil. Cousin Charlie Woodford, that scandalous scoundrel. He tole you 'bout Cousin Hammond leavin' for the Texies an' Cousin Warren left sickly an' alone—so you figure to move in—with yo' vial of pizen and

kindly 'inherit' Falconhurst . . . but they was jus' one little thing Charlie Woodford fo'got to tell you—poor Masta Warren, he not total alone—I heah with him—me—Miz Lucretia Borgia of Falconhurst."

XXXI

There are silences more clamorous than the din of a thousand drums. For long moments no one spoke in that living room. The muzzing of blue flies at the screens was the loudest sound, and yet it was as if nerve-shattering noises assaulted the three people. From outside, faint, familiar sounds of farm animals, barnyard fowls, song-birds, and workingmen intruded, but only distantly, totally unrelated to any of them at that moment.

Vesta gazed at Lucretia Borgia as if the black woman were some vile and contemptible pest to be eradicated, but no more important than that.

After a long, taut wait, Vesta walked past Lucretia Borgia and crossed the room to the foyer entrance. She shut the door and locked it. She removed the key and closed it in her left fist. Lucretia Borgia's gaze followed her. A faint, insolent smile pulled at her mouth. She returned, taking her time, to her place beside Bower Ledbetter's chair.

Lucretia Borgia caught her breath involuntarily. Bower now held a gun in his hand, almost negligently. He had taken it from the chair cushion beside him and hefted it in a casual way, holding his index finger on its trigger.

Somehow this latest threat left Lucretia Borgia calmer than ever. She had never anticipated that this woman

and her accomplice would turn over and play dead for her on command. She said, "Well, I see this talk with me was well planned. In advance."

Bower remained detached. Vesta merely shrugged.

She said in a most sane and reasonable tone, "If we couldn't talk to you in a rational way, we knew we had to do something."

"And now you know," Lucretia Borgia said.

"Now we know we can't reason with you because you won't show good sense."

Lucretia Borgia laughed in an exasperated way. "Shootin' me? With that cannon-roaring, chimney-smokin' handgun? In a house full of people? In broad daylight? Is that your idea of showin' good sense?"

Vesta's tone matched hers; she had regained all her old lost composure. She was in charge again. "You worry about us too much, Lucretia Borgia. And you're not all that brilliant. If you'd had the sense of a hound dog, you'd have stayed away from here. You knew I didn't want you here. You knew I wouldn't have you here."

"I jus' didn't give a damn about your wants, Miz Vesta. . . . Evah since I seed you cavortin' nekkid on that red-lighted dais in Roche's parlor, I ain't been overflowin' with respect fo' you—you jus' what ole Roche called you—a nightshade."

Vesta shrugged. "A deadly nightshade, as you'll see."

"If your pimp there is a-goin' to shoot me, go ahead. . . . I want to see how you get away with it in a house full of people."

"I told you, woman, don't worry so much. I know what I'm doing. I always know what I'm doing. . . . I've done without all my life. . . . I've done things I didn't want to do. . . . But I knew where I was going. . . . I've always known where I was going . . . and if you think I'm going to let a biggety nigger wench stop me, you're insane."

"One of us is, that's fo' sure."

Vesta now actually laughed. "Well, I'm going to be

rich—one of the richest women in New Orleans—and the snobs who despised me will crawl on their bellies to me. And you'll be—dead. I'll let you decide who's insane here. What are you dying for? A master who enslaves you? Who sold you off—to Roche? Who mistreats you? Is it worth it? I'm offering you the chance to walk out of here. Take what you want. Get away. Go free. Do what you want—only don't get in my way."

"'Fraid I's already made up my mind about that, Miss Vesta. I here to stay. Just like you think you is. If you means to kill me, I don't think you can get away with that."

"Oh, that shows how stupid you are! Bower and I will simply say you came back here to rob. The law will accept our word, but they will not accept testimony of these blacks against us. We'll say we tried to reason with you—as I am trying—but that you reverted—a bush nigger gone bad, and every white man knows nothing's to be feared more than a bush nigger reverted."

"Only I ain't no bush nigger. I a Hausa—"

"It won't matter." Vesta laughed at her. "Nobody will give a damn what you are when you are dead—and, I assure you, you are as good as dead. You won't listen to reason, and I'm sick of talking about it. Kill her, Bower. Kill the bitch and let's get it over with."

Mem lunged back from the parlor-door keyhole, where he had been listening. His body felt weak as whey. His mind sagged heavily in his skull. He knew he had to think, and yet he could not think at all. He could only stand there, trembling in terror, wanting to help Miz Lucretia Borgia but unable to break into that room. He simply could not do it.

With no plan in his mind Mem turned and ran in a half-staggering way out the front door. He let the door slam behind him. He did not truly know if he ran for help or was simply running away. No matter how desperately he might wish to help his beloved Miz Lucretia

Borgia, he was too terrorized of that white woman even to approach her.

The blazing sun bore down on his shoulders. He sweated profusely. Dogs ran out from shade of trees and from under the steps to cavort happily, barking at his heels.

He heard men yelling his name from the barn. Some even asked him what was wrong. They laughed. "Somebody set a fire under your tail, Mem?"

He glanced toward them, but they all looked as helpless as he. Even the huge Napoleon, who could wield a bullwhip as if it were a shoelace, would be a frightened puppy confronting white people in the big house. Just entering the manor house after being denied access to it all his life would unman the goliath Napoleon. "He be as helpless as me," Mem thought, "an' I pants-peein' helpless."

Ahead of him, he saw the young Satyr. The youth was just mounting the high plank steps to his cabin and whatever delicious black teenage virgin Mama Lucy had provided him.

Mem yelled, "Satyr. You, boy. Satyr."

Satyr paused on the steps, staring back through the glare of sunlight. Recognizing the head butler from the big house, he nodded and came down the steps and met Mem in the lane.

"How you comin' on, Mistah Memnon?" he said politely.

"You got to come up to the big house with me. We got trouble up there. We got ourselves big trouble."

Satyr shook his head and laughed. "I cain't go up to that big house yonder. Miz Lucretia done tole me."

"You got to." Mem caught the boy's arm, yanking him.

Satyr shook free. "They whup me if'n I go up there where I got no business."

"That didn't stop you when you wanted to see Miz Lucretia Borgia. . . . If evah you hope to see her alive

again, you best come with me now. . . . They kill Miz Lucretia Borgia an' you don't hurry."

Satyr hesitated no longer. His face contorted with outrage and disbelief that any being would want to harm Miz Lucretia Borgia. He ran past Mem, streaking across the yard, the dogs barking.

Mem followed at his heels. At the side of the house Satyr hesitated, unsure what to do next. Mem ran past him, going around to the front gallery. "This way," he said.

When Bower remained sitting, immobile, with the gun in his hand, Vesta jerked her head around. Her voice lashed out, "Damn it, you gutless wonder. I've supported you ever since I met you. Can't you do anything for me? Can't you do one damn thing right?"

"You didn't say murder, Vesta."

"I didn't say it. But I've said it a hundred times since we got here, and I'm saying it now. . . . It's not murder, damn you. . . . You know that. . . . Killing a black—that's not murder."

"Suppose the old man comes downstairs—he can testify against us."

"He's not coming downstairs. He can't walk. He can hardly stand up."

"He'll hear the shot."

"Damn your worthless soul, Bower Ledbetter." Vesta screeched now, totally losing her composure. "Who gives a damn what that sick old vulture upstairs hears? Do you think he'll live long enough to testify against anybody? Do you think I'll let him?"

Bower shuddered, his face ashen, but he forced himself to his feet, holding the gun gingerly at the end of his long arm. "I got no belly for this."

"You got no belly for anything but living off women," Vesta said. "I tell you. If I have to do this without you, Bower, we're finished."

He shook his head. "No. Vesta. You're wrong. After

this, you and me are closer than skin. . . . We do this—we're in it together—to the end of time."

"Then do it!" she screamed at him.

Bower swallowed back at the bile welling up in his throat. They heard the screen door slam again. The first time he'd heard it, it had almost unmanned him. It stopped him now. "Who's that?" His whisper was hoarse.

Vesta's mouth twisted with hatred and contempt. "Who cares, you sniveling coward? Do it—if she lives, we're damned. Even you've got sense enough to see that."

Bower lifted the gun. Even with the weapon tilted in his thin fist and his finger on the trigger, he did not look deadly or even formidable to Lucretia Borgia. She had been far more afraid of that big gal Coffee in that mud ring at Remick.

She waited until he started the snout of the gun up, and then she lunged forward, as light and supple on her feet as any ballet dancer. Vesta screamed and Bower howled in shocked agony, and someone was pounding on the locked door.

With her left arm Lucretia Borgia slapped the gun aside. She lowered her head and drove into Bower's thin chest with the impact of a pile driver. The air burst from him and he staggered back, striking against the field-stone fireplace.

Vesta grabbed at Lucretia Borgia's head. Her fists closed on the red turban and yanked it away. She held it impotently for a moment, and then threw it down, grasping at Lucretia's short wiry hair and beating her about the head.

She could yank Lucretia's head back, but she could not budge the woman in any way. Lucretia Borgia kept pummeling Bower. He set himself and clawed at her, striking her viciously in the breasts, in the well-learned way he'd always handled his women. Lucretia Borgia did not even cry out. He caught at her throat, pressing in his thumbs with all his strength.

Lucretia gasped, weakening slightly. Sucking in air, she struck wildly at Vesta, who stumbled away a step or

two. Those long, pitiless fingers at Lucretia's throat tightened, viselike, closing off all oxygen. Lucretia writhed helplessly.

Vesta looked frantically about the room. She saw the fire poker beside the hearth. She sprang to it and grabbed it up.

Behind her, she heard something batter at the locked door. She did not even look that way; she was insensate with the need to destroy that black woman, to hit her and hit her and never stop hitting her.

The door splintered and fell open, swinging back and hanging like a broken wing.

Satyr sprang through the doorway. Mem followed across the threshold and then stopped, unable to proceed another step.

An agonized primal howl poured from Satyr's mouth. He did not hesitate a second. He ran across the room. He caught Vesta's slender throat in his left hand and crushed his fingers closed. Holding her at the end of his arm, he caught Bower's neck in his right fist, closing it. He shook them as a terrier shakes its prey.

Vesta sagged first, inert, and then Bower shuddered visibly from head to toe and slumped, lifeless.

Satyr stood there, his fists clutched closed, the muscles and tendons standing raised and rigid along his arm and all the way to his shoulders. Miz Lucretia Borgia screamed his name, and he shook his head as if coming awake from a nightmare.

He dropped the two people from his hands as if they were discarded rag dolls.

He tried to smile, puzzled and deeply disturbed, but satisfied too. "Nobody hurts my sweet Miz Lucretia Borgia," he said.

Outside, from a sun-brazened sky, abruptly darkening, it began to rain thunderously.

She heard Dr. Redfield arrive. He ran across the porch and through the front door to escape the downpour. He did not look toward the parlor but proceeded directly upstairs to Maxwell's sickroom, where he stayed all

afternoon. Not even by nightfall had anything changed; the rain increased and Lucretia did not leave that murder site and Mem and Satyr remained beside her, silent and helpless as the eternal hours dragged past.

XXXII

The darkling world closed in about Lucretia Borgia like some suffocating shroud. For her, no matter what she did, doom impended. Nothing else had any reality. None of the familiar furnishings and wall hangings around her seemed real. For the first time in her life she felt drained, lost, and totally helpless. She walked, slow and plodding, as if in a nightmare, where she tried to hurry and could not. The voices around her and the sounds drifting down the darkened stairwell from upstairs were hollow and insubstantial, meaningless noises.

The thundersquall intensified. Rain pounded the cypress shakes of the roofing and cascaded into rain barrels, sloshing and splashing over the sides and pooling, ankle-deep, in the sodden earth. Water could no longer be absorbed by the red clay; it did not run off; the whole valley was pregnant with water. The Tombigbee burst over its highest parapets. The black and cavernous heavens flared blindingly white as lightning blasted and thunder shook the wet world. Even if there were lanterns or candles burning in the slave shacks or the meeting-house dormitory, their feeble glow could not be seen through the black torrents of rain. The huge old plantation house stood like an island, isolated and abandoned in an evil and hostile cosmos. Lucretia Borgia looked around emp-

tilly, powerless to change anything, powerless to speed time or to slow it down. A languid euphoria enveloped the static night.

Death embraced this house in its chilled, unyielding grasp, and even the night seemed stunned with the power and terror of death. Looking at Satyr and Memnon, Lucretia Borgia shivered. As terrorized as she was, she was the only person of any use. In the taut pit of her belly, she quivered with fear, and screams of primal terror echoed deep inside her mind. She wanted to sag to the floor and moan and wail out her anxiety and exhaustion. Her hands made fists at her sides. If she fell apart now, nothing could save them. From where she stood she could see no way out for them. Negroes who slew white people dangled from white hang-ropes. She had to find some way to save them, because Satyr was a child and Memnon had never had a clear thought in his life. She looked around, as if trapped. She did not know what she could do. Nobody had yet figured out a way to undo murder. She was so tired, so near collapse. She just wanted to lie down and cry like a little girl cries. But this was another luxury denied her by her race, by her status, by who she was, and by who people had come to believe she was, the indomitable Miz Lucretia Borgia of Falconhurst. Hell, even when she was a little girl, hurt and afraid and lonely, she had not been permitted to cry like other little girls. She'd learned to hide all her inner terrors, and needs and pain, and she tried to hide them now. She sucked in deeply against the shortness of breath that threatened to unnerve her. Outwardly, she tried to appear to be her old self, obsequious to the whites, dictatorial to the slaves, responsible, strong, dependable, and indispensable. Hell, she *was* indispensable. She had learned this as she had trained herself slowly and painfully and tenaciously to be smarter than any white man she met, stronger than any black, eternally smiling at the outrages and backbreaking labors that were heaped upon and killed off her sisters. She'd escaped that life, and she'd escape this trap.

"What we goin' do, Miz Lucretia, ma'am?"

Lucretia Borgia's turbaned head jerked up. She stared across her shoulder at Memnon. The whining, pleading tone showed how helpless he was. She'd heard that begging, prayerful voice before. Memnon thought it made her sympathetic when he got on his knees to her. If only he knew it made her want to smash her fist across his nose to rouse some gumption in him. She bit back an angry reply. "How I know what we goin' do, Memnon? All I know is what you know. We got to do something and got to do it fast."

"Yes'm . . ." His full apricot-colored underlip trembled. He stood for a moment, mesmerized by the deep silences and faint noises. He glanced upward, rolling his eyes so the white rings showed. "Doc Redfield upstairs. Mayhap he can—"

"You stupid old goat. We can't trust that white man."

"Somebody got to help us."

"We got to help ourselves, Memnon. Or they ain't no help. We got to think of something—and fast—or the three of us goin' to hang for sure."

Memnon burst into tears.

"Stop that crying and whining," she ordered. "Crying don't help you think none. You forget about tryin' to git ole Doc Redfield to help. We can't trust him. Can't trust no white man . . ." She shivered visibly, glancing at the rag-doll bodies crumpled on the throw rugs near the fireplace. "We got us a secret we can't never trust nobody with—white or black."

She was aware of a sharp, aborted snuffle. She turned. Satyr stood, tall, broad, muscular, his handsome light-chocolate face twisted, his black eyes brimmed with tears.

She kept her voice gentle despite her tension. "What's the matter, Satyr?"

Satyr shook his head helplessly. There was no remorse in his face for what he had done, only regret. "I's made trouble fo' you, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am. . . . Never meant to. Jus' trying to help you. You like a

god-lady to me, Miz Lucretia. . . . Never even loved my own mother like I loves you."

"I hope not." Lucretia Borgia pinched his bicep, trying to smile, trying to make Satyr smile. But though he tried to respond to her kindness, his face remained rigid.

She touched his soft tender young face with the cupped palms of both her hands. She gazed up at him, smiling as she would to reassure a child. "Don't you give it no frettin' time, Satyr." She jerked her head toward the bodies cast on the floor. "Don't think about them no more. They was bad and evil. More bad and evil than any other white people I've ever knowed, and I've knowed some evil ones."

"Yes'm." His voice sounded dead. Even the flagging firelight glittering in the depths of his flat eyes did not stir life in them.

"What you done, Satyr, you done for me. Ain't that right?"

"Yes'm." Satyr nodded, somewhat mollified, chewing this over in the craw of his mind.

"You done it for me and for Masta Warren. An' for Falconhurst. You done what you had to."

He nodded, but whispered, "Yes'm. Still, I kilt white folks."

"Evil white folks, Satyr. Thievin' white folks what was tryin' to steal all of Falconhurst from Masta Warren, even did they have to kill him."

"Yes'm. I done what I had to do. I do that over. But what I also done is make worse trouble for you—and for Mas' Memnon. . . . I a stupid black boy, but I know, 'cause I been tole all my life, ain't no defense in this heah world fo' a black man what kills a white person—I been tole that all my life."

"But white folks got to *know* about that killin' 'fore they is *any* trouble. . . . That's why I wants you to forget about it. Forget all about it. What you done. What you seen. What you heard. Put it out'n your mind, Satyr. As long as nobody but the three of us"—she glanced over her heavy shoulder at Memnon, who

watched her, wild-eyed—"as long as the three of us can keep this a secret, you're safe, Mem's safe—we all safe."

"Me?" Mem said. "Safe? Why you countin' me in on some hangin'? Why I need to be safe? What I done? I ain't kilt nobody."

"No. 'Cause you ain't got the guts of a June bug. But you guilty, Memnon. Guilty as Satyr or me. You done been an accessory to murder. Murder of two white people. That means you helped kill them. That means you was here and wanted them dead."

Mem's eyes brimmed with tears. "They cain't no way hang you fo' *wantin'* a white person daid. . . . I'd been hung a hundred times. . . . I ain't done nothin'. . . . I run to git Satyr 'cause I was aimin' to save you."

She nodded, her jaw a hard line. "An' you did. . . . But now I cain't take no chance on you. You gittin' drunk drainin' off all Masta Warren's toddy glasses and gittin' so pie-eyed, you talks about this night—"

"Oh, I nevah do that."

"You bettah not. To nobody. Nevah. You bettah not. Cause if'n you do, I wrings your scrawny neck like a half-plucked banty rooster."

He shivered, nodding. "I know we gots troubles."

"But we *all* got troubles. So I figure maybe it helps if you know you in this thing deep as me—or Satyr. . . . It's you *tole* him to do it."

Mem stared around helplessly, the shadows clawing at the dark walls, rain battering the windowpanes. He looked as if he might vomit. If he fell apart now, he would ruin everything for certain, Lucretia knew.

She softened her tone and tried to give him a faint smile. "But they one way out, Mem."

"How's that?"

"If'n you fo'git this night—jus' like I askin' Satyr to do. Like it was a nightmare. An' you say nothin' . . . then you got nothin' to worry about."

They heard the heavy tread of Redfield's boots on the oak flooring of Warren's upstairs bedroom. How long before Redfield was going to miss Vesta? How long

before he called for her to help him? Lucretia looked about, feeling trapped. "We got to git rid of these here bodies."

"How we do that?"

"I don't know. . . . Think, fool. We hides 'em where nobody evah finds them."

"What we goin' say to Doc Redfield? What we say where-at Mas' Bower and Miz Vesta gone?"

Lucretia Borgia made a sharp downward gesture with her arm. This was the least of her concerns. "We tell him they gone. They gone back to New Orleans. They left sudden."

"In this storm?"

"In this storm. Don't ask fo' trouble, Mem. You got enough without askin' for more. We say they knew he suspected about the poison—they got scairt. They took they carriage and run away."

Mem let this wallow in the slow backwaters of his mental processes. At last his eyes showed a faint glimmer of hope. "You reckon Doc Redfield goin' believe that?"

She nodded emphatically, feeling some of the old self-confidence returning. "I do. . . . He'll believe it . . . 'cause he'll want to believe it. . . . That's the easiest for him—for ever'body. They got scairt and they run. They gone. He don't have to deal with *nothin'* . . . long as he don't see these here dead bodies."

They stared at the distorted forms sprawled in death on the flooring. Miz Vesta and her Master Bower had been nothing but trouble when they breathed; now they looked suddenly more dangerous than ever, lying there silent and unmoving. . . .

Lucretia Borgia listened to the thud of the rain on the roof, the thump of Redfield's boots above her, to the pound of her own heart, and Mem's helpless sniffing. She felt as if for this instant she were alone in the eye of some catastrophic hurricane that swirled all around her

and would soon sweep her away but that for the moment left her in a dead and helpless silence.

She went over and over it in her mind, trying to figure what to do. Every path she looked along led straight to the gallows. She may have remained unmoving, but Satyr whimpered, looking as if his huge, hulking mass of tendons and muscle and sinew were going to sag to mush.

"Come on," she said to Satyr. She took his hand and led him from the parlor. Mem hesitated a moment, glanced at the bodies on the throw rugs, and hastened after them, shoulders hunched against the evil in that shadowed room.

In her kitchen Lucretia Borgia sat Satyr down at the scrubbed pine table. Mem sat in a chair near him. Lucretia brought a jug of milk from the underground cooling room and set glasses before them. She placed a tray of freshly iced cinnamon buns in front of Satyr. He nodded his gratitude and fell to eating wolfishly. Mem sat unmoving. Lucretia Borgia tried to smile. "Eat, Mem. Everything look better on a full belly."

She watched Mem chew at the bun, listless, his insides twisted with terror. He offered her a bun, but she shook her head. She *knew* she would throw up if she tried to eat. If only she could find a base of that old lost security, that self-assurance that had never failed her before. But there was no succor, no relief for her. It was as if she were in some strange and forbidding place. Not even her own kitchen gave her any sense of certainty.

As Lucretia Borgia lumbered heavily from the table to the stove and back again, she could find nothing that was as she recalled. The big old Seth Thomas clock ticked, muted against the thunder and rain. Neither Mem nor Satyr spoke. There was no sense looking to them for help. She'd find a way out inside herself, or God help them, there was none.

Myra Belle burst into the kitchen, her slender face sweated and twisted. "Lord a-mercy, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ain't you heard Doc Redfield a-callin' you?"

"Ain't heard nothin'." Lucretia Borgia shook her head. "What's the matter? What that ole hoss doctor want now?"

"He say he need you to help him. He say he done purge Masta Warren. He say hit looks like Masta Warren goin' make it. Goin' be all right—"

"Merciful Gawd," Lucretia Borgia whispered.

"Doc say he ain't sure . . . he say hit be toward mornin' 'fore he can say for true that Masta Warren past danger. . . . Say he need help a-cleanin' him up."

Lucretia Borgia nodded, understanding, but then shook her head vigorously, disagreeing. "I got no time right now."

Myra Belle wailed, her face twisted. "But Masta Warren, he done mess hisself, Miz Lucretia. He done mess hisself, his sheet, and all them blankets he keeps on him and the floor and everything."

"Then clean it up, you no-good thing. Ain't Doc Redfield a-yellin' fo' me. It you. You git your black ass back up them stairs."

"But it all covered with it. . . . I cain't touch that."

"You touch that, or I touch you with a whip, Missy. You jus' make up your mind. You gits back up there—and you stays there."

"But it ain't jus' the shit, Miz Lucretia . . . that's on everything . . . but it's that Doc Redfield. . . . I scairt of him."

"Why you scairt of him? You ain't scairt of no other man."

"He different. He always grabbin' at me and puttin' his hands twixt my legs and pullin' out my titties—"

"Can that hurt you? That puny little white runt. Got a pecker like a possum. . . . Oh, I's seed it . . . at its best . . . wouldn't harm no six-year-ole."

"I don't like him a-grabbin' at me an' sayin' the things he want me to do."

Lucretia Borgia caught the girl's arm in a fierce grasp. "You listen to me, Myra Belle. An' you listen good. You go back up there. An' you stay up there. You tell

Doc Redfield I busy, but you will do whatever he say you to do. *Whatever he say*. You understand me? You do it. You do whatever he say to you to do. Just you keep him up there."

"You mean I got to let him pull up my skirt?"

"Especially that! You let that ole puny white man do *anything* he thinks he wants to do—an' you keep him doin' it till I come up there."

As she talked Miz Lucretia Borgia heeled around and strode out of the kitchen, going through the family dining room, into the darkened corridor, dragging Myra Belle behind her.

At the foot of the stairs she gave the girl a thrust upward. Myra Belle sprawled for a moment on the runner of the stairs, staring, wide-eyed, down at her. Miz Lucretia Borgia remained, an immovable bulwark at the foot of the steps. Her eyes brimmed with tears, Myra Belle pushed herself slowly up to her feet and moved toward the shadowed upper hallway as if on her way to doom.

Myra Belle's reluctance had galvanized Lucretia to action, renewed the need for haste, made her see again that her most formidable foe of all right now was time itself.

She turned and made her way, dazed but resolute, into the silent front room, this sudden morgue. The fire guttered at the hearth. The rest of the room was in shadowed dark. But the two bodies seemed strangely and brilliantly illumined.

She shivered. It was upsetting that they were exactly as she had left them, twisted oddly out of shape, almost as if they were clownlike figures and had never really lived. The rain battered at the windows, blown in on the wind.

Lucretia Borgia forced herself to cross the room to the twisted figures on the carpeting. She stared down at Vesta, hating her. She hated her for being dead, for being murdered and leaving all the agony behind her for the living. She despised her for the way she had come

here, meaning to take over this great stud farm from an aging and ailing man, just because his son had run away to the Texies. She even found she still hated Vesta for the way she had boasted that she had come to Falconhurst to stay and that she would take over the plantation and she would stay here forever.

Miz Lucretia Borgia shivered violently, as if overcome with cold. She hugged her arms across her full breasts. For one long beat she went on staring down at Vesta and Bower, then she heeled around, and, still trembling, she strode toward the kitchen.

Satyr and Memnon had not moved. They had hardly spoken since she'd left them. She saw that the milk was gone, the container empty, and the buns had disappeared to the crumbs, but neither Mem nor Satyr had stirred to replenish the food. They sat, unable to move, until she told them to move.

"Come on," she said. "We got a lot to do."

They got up slowly and walked stiffly, following her from the kitchen. She paused at the linen closet in the dark hallway. The two men stood in silence behind her. From a high shelf she took down two brown woolen blankets. She carefully chose two aging, frayed covers because, even in panic, Miz Lucretia Borgia was a frugal and conscientious woman.

Carrying the blankets folded under her arm, Miz Lucretia Borgia closed the closet door and jerked her head, motioning Mem and Satyr to follow her.

When they walked into the dimly lit living room where the logs were burned down almost to red embers, she saw Mem begin to shake his head. She heard his teeth chatter. She looked at the bodies and found them somehow strangely luminous, their gray flesh reflecting the last shards of firelight from the hearth. In the shadowed room the two bodies appeared to glow, as cankerous evil glows in dank places.

She spoke in a taut whisper. "Satyr, wrap the man in this blanket. Mem, you wrap that woman in this one. And hurry."

Satyr took the blanket and bent over Bower's twisted body, but Mem stood immobile, the blanket dangling at the end of his long arm. "I cain't. I cain't touch no daid body," he whispered.

"Hurry," she said.

Mem knelt but still could not force himself to spread the blanket and roll the corpse upon it, as Satyr had done. He hesitated, gagging, and crouched there, cringing.

Miz Lucretia Borgia threw up the back of her hand. She did not speak, but she didn't have to. Mem understood her message loud and clear.

The man securely wrapped like a mummy in the blanket, Satyr helped Mem roll the woman's body up.

"Let's go," Lucretia Borgia said. "Even do anyone see us, we can say it baggage. Nobody can swear in the dark."

"We goin' bury them?" Mem whispered, shaking his head. "We goin' try to dig graves—in this storm?"

"Better than that," Miz Lucretia Borgia said. "We going to put these bodies where they buried good, and where nobody on this earth won't never find 'em 'fore Judgment Day. Sweet Jesus hisself goin' have to dig deep to find them."

She motioned them ahead of her. They went out of the parlor and across the entry. She held the door open until they were on the veranda, then she let it close slowly and quietly. She was aware she was holding her breath.

"Rain done let up some," Satyr whispered.

Miz Lucretia nodded. The abating rain was a blessing only when you didn't think too deeply about its implications. She had counted on the fury of the storm keeping all the slaves in their cabins. As the storm lifted there was always the chance someone would walk out to the barn or along the worm fence down at the family burial plot, or wander out to one of the wells for a drink of water, or in answer to a call of nature. "Please, merciful God," she whispered under her breath.

Panting at her heels, Mem whispered, "What you say?"

She spoke across her shoulder, padding through the ankle-deep water of the yard toward the barns and work yard. "Jes' you be careful," she told him. "Don't you drop that body."

She led them under the dripping elms and hammock hickory trees to the stone-lipped mouth of the dry well. She paused there a long moment, staring around her, at the shanties where the slave families lived, the barns, the pens and corrals, the dormitories for the young boys, the burial grounds, and the open fields beyond. Buildings and houses were regaining shape as the rain lessened.

"Drap 'em in," she said.

She heard Mem's sharp gasp, but he did not protest. Satyr dropped the man's body first. There was a terrible protracted silence, in which they held their breath, almost as if counting, and then the remote, muted thud as the corpse struck the sump of the dry well. Satyr lifted the woman's corpse from Mem's quavering shoulder and dropped it into the hole. Again they waited, and then after an incredibly prolonged time, Vesta's body struck upon Bower's in the damp and silent depth.

Neither Mem nor Satyr spoke. They were waiting for her to tell them what to do, how to take up their lives again.

For a long time Miz Lucretia remained unmoving there beside this aged and useless well. She stood, thinking emptily that this well had once been young and productive and fruitful, a vital part of this old farm. Now it was old and dead and good only as grave sites for dead vultures. Once, it had slaked the thirsts of generations of Hammonds and Maxwells and all their friends and neighbors and foes and customers. From this well Hammond had forced the Mandingo Mede to carry oakwood buckets to fill the huge vat in which Ham had boiled the meat from the slave's bones. She shivered, recalling in horror the way the beautiful Mede had died to expunge

a white man's honor. This well was like one of the hearts of this place, a heart gone bad.

She shook her head as if awakening in a strange place. She said, "Satyr, you get shovels and a wheelbarrow from the barn."

"What we goin' do?" Mem said.

"We covers them up," Lucretia said. "Or you want them to stink from down there? You want to hang from some white man's hang-rope?"

"Oh, Gawd," Mem whispered. "It don't end. It jus' don't end."

"It ain't easy," Miz Lucretia answered in a bland tone. "It's like that when you kill somebody."

Mem began to cry. "We never gets that deep hole filled up, Miz Lucretia."

She grabbed his arm and shook him. When he went on protesting, she struck him across the face with the back of her hand. He stood quiet then, taut and unbreathing. "You go yonder," she said. "You tote stones from the rock pile and drop them in."

"I a house nigger. I ain't no field hand," Mem whimpered. She raised her hand again and he lunged away, stumbling toward the mountain of stones.

She remained where she was until Mem reached the stone pile. He took up a small rock, then changed his mind, bringing instead a large boulder. "You goin' to be carryin' lots of stones," Lucretia said. "Don't try to kill yourself the first hour."

"Let me die fast," Mem gasped, already exhausted. "Dyin' one way is like dyin' any other."

She glanced back toward the house. The rain had past and gone; only a faint chilled mist blew in on the night wind. There was only a lamp lit in Master Warren's upstairs front bedroom. The blinds were drawn behind the closed rain-frosted windows. She could dimly discern shadows in the lamplit bedroom; smiling faintly, she recognized the vet and Myra Belle. For one long beat she watched their shadows embrace and struggle and lunge, standing up.

She watched Satyr empty huge barrowloads of wet earth into the dry well. Mem walked stiffly between stone mound and well, back and forth. She joined him, carrying boulders as large as she could heft. She was impatient for the end, but she knew better than to hurry. She forced herself to walk slowly, to think ahead every step. Take your time, she kept warning herself. Make no mistakes that could cost you your life. You can't afford even one mistake.

She faltered between stone mound and well, back and forth, unspeaking. Her arms tore and bled. Her breasts grew sore. The backs of her legs threatened to buckle.

She lost track of time. She was vaguely aware that someone spoke to her. She stopped walking, putting her legs apart to brace herself. The late-night world wheeled and skidded about her head.

"What you say?" She stared at the huge Satyr.

"It's nigh on to first dawn," Satyr said. "The folks will soon start to stir."

She caught her breath, looking around. Mem sat on the ground, his arms wrapped around his legs, head sunk between his knees. Her voice quavered with fatigue and fear. "Hurry," she said. "We got to hurry."

"It's all right, Miz Lucretia Borgia, ma'am." Satyr's voice was gentle. "We done it. We done filled up that ole well. Anybody have to dig mighty deep to find anything down there."

A kind of hysterical relief flooded through Miz Lucretia. She wanted to wail out in triumph, but she did not speak at all. She clutched Satyr in her arms and held him for a long moment. Then she placed the last stone carefully atop the dry well. Her voice shook with inner pleasure and the thrill of vengeance. "Well, that Miz Vesta and her Masta Bower done got they wish."

Mem lifted his head. "How you say that, woman? They dead, ain't they?"

She nodded, her teeth showing in a fierce smile of victory. "Tha's right. Stone. Cold. Doornail dead. At the bottom of this heah well. But they got what they

wanted, what they say to me they going to have. She swear she gone stay here at Falconhurst forever, no matter what I do. . . . And now she sho will. Her wish done purentee and total come true."